Notes for the South African TV on the visits paid on Robben Island between 1973 and 1975 to Mr Nelson Mandely by Dr Jacques Moreillon as ICRC Delegate General for Africa

Notice: the present text is for background information and NOT for publication

(It is an extract of a more complete study for the ICRC. References contained in footnotes are to the complete text.)
1. Background

In the days of apartheid the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) paid numerous, regular visits to all *convicted* political prisoners in South Africa (Unfortunately, despite much insistence, the ICRC did not obtain access to detainees *under interrogation and/or trial*).

With regard to Robben Island, annex I gives the list of visits paid by the ICRC and the names of the visiting delegates between 1963 and 1986.

As is still the case today, ICRC visits to prisoners – whatever their legal status, be they recognized as "political" detainees or not, or even as prisoners of war – followed a procedure that was, at the time of the visits to Robben Island pretty standard, as reflected in the structure of the ICRC report on such visits, which covered all aspects of the conditions of detention:

- name of the place
- name(s) of the delegate(s) visiting
- general geographic situation
- date of visit
- date of previous visit (if any)
- name of commanding officer, medical doctor and possibly other key officers or number of staff
- capacity of prison
- number and categories of inmates
- description of quarters (varying from section to section)
- food
- clothing
- hygiene
- medical assistance
- deaths
- religious services
- recreation and study
- work
- financial resources
- correspondence
- visits
- treatment (or relations with warders)
- general remarks and suggestions

Proposals about the conditions of detention would usually be made, both orally and in writing, at four levels (and often repeated at all of them):

- the Commanding Officer of the place of detention in question
- the General Commissioner of Prisons
- the Minister concerned (usually of Justice)
- the Minister of Foreign Affairs and/or the Minister of Justice, by letter from the President of the ICRC in Geneva (through the Permanent Mission of South Africa).

The visit itself would normally start and end with an interview with the Prison Director and include a thorough inspection of all parts of the prison, as well as *interviews without witness* with prisoners chosen freely by the delegate(s) and with any prisoner who expressed the desire to have such an interview.
These interviews, how they were conducted, the confidence the delegate(s) inspired (or not) in the prisoner, the details, number and length of them and the notes taken during them, would be absolutely key to knowing the real situation in the prison.

Equally important would be the manner in which the delegates communicated with their government interlocutors (insistence, tone, choice of words, body language) and the arguments used, as well as the contents of the covering letter, accompanying the reports, signed at the highest level of the ICRC in Geneva. These reports would normally not only describe the situation as found by the delegate(s) but also make proposals for specific improvements, item by item, and include the oral response received from the authorities, if any, to each proposal. They were strictly confidential and will stay so for 40 years after the date of the visit.

These rules and practices were valid and implemented in all countries in which the ICRC visited detained people, whatever their legal qualification. Cardinal were the requirements:

- to see all inmates in a place of detention
- to speak alone with any (or even all) of them
- to repeat these visits regularly, once a year being a minimum.

Whereas detaining powers in an international conflict have a duty to give to the ICRC access to the prisoners of war which they hold, governments who have "political" or "security" detainees in times of internal tension or violence have no such obligations. The ICRC has a statutory right to "offer its services" to these governments and may ask to visit these prisoners, but no State is obliged to accept such an offer. This was the legal situation in South Africa in the days of apartheid.

Numerous publications, mainly by former prisoners, mention these visits. Annex II gives a bibliography of most of these and of some others related to the subject. These publications also show the evolution of the conditions of detention during these years, including some of the improvements which the ICRC was able to bring – not without difficulty – to these conditions.

The present paper relates exclusively to the six contacts (over three series of visits in 1973, 1974 and 1975) which the undersigned, as ICRC Delegate General for Africa, had with prisoner Nelson Mandela on Robben Island. It does not deal with other periods, other prisoners or other places of detention. However, Annex III gives details on the eight other contacts which I had with Mr. Mandela as a free man, between 1990 and 2004.

2. "Have you seen Madiba?"

"Have you seen Madiba?" the hotel porter asked me as he set down my suitcases. I did not know whom he meant by Madiba. I had no idea that that was what his friends, his people called Nelson Mandela. I should have known, but I had not done my homework properly. It was my mistake, for it was part of my job to know this kind of thing.

In fact, before visiting VIP prisoners for the first time (whether prisoners of war or, especially, political detainees), we would sometimes ask their spouses beforehand if they had affectionate names for each other, so that we could tell the detainee that we were bringing much love from, say, his or her "little ducky". They would then know right away that they could trust the man who walked into their closed universe wearing the Red Cross badge. I had used this method sometimes in the past, for instance when visiting Israeli prisoners of war in Syria in 1967. But, this time, I had not come well enough prepared and I did not know
that a particular prisoner was known to many as "Madiba" (his Xhosa name) and that I had, indeed, just seen him.

In my defence, I do not think that I could have found that information in any written form, for his real name could not be printed in his own country, nor could his picture be shown, and he had been "inside" for so long already that few people who had not met him knew what he looked like. Also, I doubt that many white people were aware that this was the name used by the black people who trusted him as their Leader, or at least as one of their leaders. Except, of course, the BOSS, the feared "Bureau of State Security", which was never mentioned, but which, I had been forewarned, may have been watching my every step and bugging every phone and room I used. So I was in ignorance, but already on my guard, when the hotel porter asked: "Have you seen Madiba?"

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This incident took place on 10 May 1973 in Cape Town. I was returning from a four-day visit to Robben Island prison with my colleagues Roger Santschy and Dr Edoardo Leuthold. Ours was the first visit to be made so thoroughly and at such length by as many delegates of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) to that particular place of detention, a visit that was — according to the later testimonies of the detainees — to mark, though quite insufficiently in my view, a turning point in their conditions of detention.

The porter had carried my luggage to my hotel room and accepted my tip, saying "thank you baas", an expression that made me very uneasy. But this was South Africa in 1973, he was black and I was white. So he said "baas" ... namely "boss" in Afrikaans! But he was still standing there, staring at me, evidently wanting to say something. It could not be the tip: as a matter of principle I always over tip. So I just looked back, inquiringly. Finally, he worked up the courage to say: "Is it true that you have been on the island?" Immediately all my senses were on alert. I looked at the corners of the ceiling, at the phone, at the mirror. Was the BOSS listening? Was this man one of its agents? (I had been told that not all of them were whites.) I answered coldly: "It's none of your business" and showed him the door, which was still open.

He didn't move. "Have you seen Madiba?" he asked again, still staring at me. "Who is Madiba?" I asked back. He looked at me in amazement: "Nelson Mandela, of course!" Nelson Mandela! My God! This was worse than I had thought! Of course I had seen Nelson Mandela! Twice, in fact: on Monday 7 and on Friday 10 (that very morning), for about two hours each time. But his answer made me even more cagey and I did not know what to say, struck dumb with embarrassment.

The porter saved me from answering by asking another question: "Did you shake his hand?" He looked so intense, so pleading, so "expectant" that I could not believe that he was playing a part and I shot back: "Of course I shook his hand!", in a tone that implied: "Do you think I am the kind of white man who would not shake a black prisoner's hand?"

Then something extraordinary happened: the porter dropped to his knees; with his two hands he grabbed my right one, turned the palm towards his lips and started kissing it reverently! Not surprisingly, I quickly withdrew my hand and helped him to his feet. The man was transfigured, radiating happiness. All I could say was: "But I also shook the hand of the Prison Director!" He just shook my hand vigorously and literally exploded: "Oh Sir!" he said (thank goodness he did not say "boss" this time!) "Thank you! Thank you so much! The Lord has sent you! Thank you, Sir! God bless you!" ... and he walked out of the room, literally on a cloud, staring in wonder at the palm of his own right hand, a hand that had just shaken the hand of a man who had shaken Madiba's hand!

If I had needed an introduction to the true importance of Nelson Mandela for the black people of South Africa, this was it. I now knew how the two disciples must have felt after having
walked with – and talked to – Jesus without recognizing Him! My eyes had been opened to who "Madiba" really was.

3. My first meetings with Madiba: 7 and 10 May 1973

I have described above the standard procedures for ICRC visits to prisons. Needless to say, the way in which these procedures are interpreted in practice may vary from delegate to delegate. For instance, we know from Nelson Mandela's "Long Walk to Freedom" that ICRC delegate Geoffrey Senn, in 1967, interviewed Nelson Mandela alone but in an office. This is something which I, personally, would always refuse to do: not only because it is easier to secretly bug an office than a cell, but also because it usually creates the wrong climate between prisoner and delegate (as Mandela wrote himself, he felt “tense” when speaking to Senn). I would always interview detainees in their own cells (if they were alone), in the yard on a bench (if there was a suspicion that the cell was bugged or if they shared a cell) or in a common place, such as the kitchen or dining hall. [In Pretoria Local prison, the interviews with the white prisoners – who, rightly or wrongly, suspected their cells of being bugged – would take place in the kitchen, speaking in low voices and with a tap running to create a background noise.]

In the case of Robben Island, I made it clear to the Commanding Officer, Colonel W.H. Willemsen, right from the opening interview with him, that the other delegates and myself wished to be brought from section to section by a guard, who could lock himself and us in each section, but who would stay at the entrance and let us wander around freely, anywhere in the section, speaking alone with any inmate and in any place of our choice. I have to say that this was granted without a problem. [In fact, on my first, as well as on my next visit, in 1974, Colonel Willemsen showed himself to be a man with whom one could speak, who would listen to what we had to say and who would often follow up on our suggestions.]

Thus, on 7 May 1973, after the introductory meeting with Colonel Willemsen and while the other delegates went to visit the General and other sections, I went straight to the “single cells” (or B Section) where Mandela and the other leaders were held. There was a large yard of about 45 x 20 m, open to the sky. To the right of the yard were the punishment cells or “segregation” section and to the left were the leaders’ cells. On the day of my visit, there were 28 inmates of B Section, one of them in “segregation”. During my visit, a guard stayed inside by the door to the yard, far enough from the cells not to overhear anything and I was left alone to move around as I saw fit. As I walked into the yard, some of the inmates were there, but most were in their cells with the doors open.

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I visited and spoke alone with each prisoner, starting with cell number one. All cells were identical. They measured 2.5 x 2.2 x 3 m and had a single 1.5 x 1.5 m window to the outside, with bars and panes. A second window, measuring about 50 x 150 cm, opened onto the central corridor. Detainees were allowed to open and close the windows of their cells at will.

There was no bed, but a sisal mat, a felt mat and (in the winter) five blankets per prisoner. The detainees complained that the mat did not provide sufficient insulation from the concrete floor, especially in winter. (One of the improvements later brought about by the ICRC was the introduction of beds.)

Furniture consisted of a table, a bench and a bookshelf. Some detainees had added their own handmade furniture.

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1 For more details on Colonel (later General) W.H. Willemsen, see: note 2, Sampson, pp. 208, 223-224, 347, 384-385, 514; and note 3, Bunyan, pp. 27, 37, 197-199, 201-202, 205-208, 214-216, 223, 225-228, 230, 310; and note 7, Mandela, pp. 550-551, 629, 631, 636, 640, 657-659, 663.
Each cell had two doors, one barred, the other made of wood. When both doors were closed, isolation was complete.

The windows provided adequate natural light and ventilation. An electric light bulb in the ceiling remained lit all night. (The detainees complained that it was too weak (60 watts) and asked for a minimum of 100 watts.)

Cell doors were opened and closed at the same time as elsewhere in the prison, that is, at 6.30 a.m. and at 5 p.m. respectively.

All the detainees had their personal effects with them.

A new building had been built for the single cell prisoners to the left of the central corridor. A passage with a barred door led to:

- A recreation hall, measuring about 12 x 6 x 3.5 m. It had nine barred and glazed windows. The windows on the left gave onto the street and the panes had been painted over. They could not be opened, but those on the right, giving onto the prison itself, could. The floor was of concrete and the walls painted a light colour.

  Natural light and ventilation were adequate. Six neon lights in the ceiling provided artificial light.

  Furniture consisted of a table tennis table for use by the prisoners during their leisure hours, which, at Zugher's insistence, now included weekends.

- A dining room, measuring about 8 x 6 x 3.5 m. It had six barred and glazed windows.

  Furniture comprised six tables and ten wooden benches, which the prisoners used for their meals, apart from the evening meal which they ate in their cells.

- A toilet room, measuring about 8 x 6 x 3.5 m. It had nine windows (as above) and:
  4 pedestal basin WCs
  1 urinal
  4 hand basins with 8 cold-water taps
  3 cold-water showers
  4 basins with 4 taps.

  Detainees were allowed to use the toilet room at any time when they were in the section.

This building was quite recent: it had been in use since January 1973 and could be considered as one of the positive consequences of previous ICRC visits.

As in the rest of the prison, there was no hot water, although a hot-water system existed. For night time, each detainee had a slop pail and a supply of drinking water.

The inner courtyard was where the prisoners could spend their leisure hours. The ground was earth. There was no shade other than that provided by the buildings. At that time, there was no vegetation in the courtyard.

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It was the afternoon of 7 May 1973, and Nelson Mandela was in cell number 5. One should not forget that, at that time, I had not yet realized the extent to which he was the main leader of the ANC. To me, he was just one of the leaders. However, I was aware that, somehow, he was particularly important to the detaining authorities, since I knew that the printing of his name and of his picture was prohibited in the South African media. Here was a man over whom a blanket of silence had fallen and, of course, it made me all the more curious to meet him!

That said, I will always remember the way in which he greeted me and ushered me into his cell. As I reached his doorway with my big plastic ICRC badge pinned to the left pocket of my
blazer, he was sitting on a bench, at a school-type desk, reading with his back to the door. He turned around when he heard me, raised his eyes and quickly stood up, smiling, took two steps to the door, clasped my outreached hand and said "Nelson Mandela", as I gave my name in return. As if we were meeting in his drawing room, he said, in the most natural fashion: "Oh I am so pleased to meet you! Won't you come in and have a seat?" gesturing towards his bench as if it were a Regency armchair, and adding: "Please make yourself comfortable", while remaining standing himself. I insisted that I would not sit unless he joined me, and so we sat down on the sisal mat, reclining against the wall. He asked, as if I had just walked into the reception of a five-star hotel: "Is this your first visit to South Africa?"

I replied that I had been there privately in 1964, as part of a university study tour to Angola and Mozambique, but that it was the first time that I was on official ICRC business in the country, in order to visit the political detainees. As he enquired whether I had visited other prisoners before, in other countries, I gave him a brief summary of my ICRC career (India, Viet Nam, Syria, Biafra, Israel, South America and elsewhere in Africa), which seemed to please him.

He then asked for news of ICRC delegate Philip Zuger (who, had last visited Robben Island in November 1971, but had not been back in 1972), adding: "We missed him last year. These have been two difficult years. We were wondering what was happening and we were worried that the ICRC would forget us." Then, with a sudden air of authority, he said: "It is essential that you come regularly, at least once a year. Absolutely vital!" (Robben Island was just coming out of the terrible "Badenhorst" period, which has been described in detail by many former prisoners, including Mandela.)

I gave him and his comrades my word that we would. Before commencing with the general and individual conditions of detention, I broached the subject of his wife, Winnie. The ICRC had been approached by letter of 9 March 1973 by Mr Edwin Ogebe Ogbu, Chairman of the Special United Nations Committee on Apartheid, with the information that Mrs Mandela, who was under restricted freedom (allowed to sleep only in her own home and prohibited from receiving anyone there) was being intimidated, threatened and harassed by individuals who were thought to belong to the Special Branch.² As I would see the Minister of Justice after my visit to the island, what did Mandela think of my intervening on this matter? Mandela replied that, happily, things had improved and that his wife had not been molested for about a year, but that – since I had made the offer – he would appreciate it if I would ask the Minister to allow her brother to live with her. "This would be the best solution," he concluded. (In fact, after consulting some people outside the prison – both from government and from the opposition – I did not bring the matter to the Minister’s attention, for too many of the ICRC’s other requests were at stake and, knowing that the situation had improved for Mrs Mandela, we all concluded that it would better to focus exclusively on conditions of detention.) On my next visit to Mandela in May 1974, I explained to him the reasons for my decision and he approved, simply adding: "I would only remind you that I did not raise that subject. You did!"

Having concluded on the subject of his wife, there was a pause and Mandela said softly: "And what can I do for you?" The perfect host welcoming a guest to his abode! So I took out my checklist of items to discuss. (The list followed the classic formula of ICRC prison reports described in Chapter one.) We went through each point one by one: food, clothing, hygiene, medical assistance, study, recreation, work, correspondence, visits and relations with warders. On each of these points, he made precise comments, never speaking of himself but always of, and for, others, except on one point: he had pains in the back and found that the sisal mat was – especially with winter humidity – "not helpful" … to use his words! I told him that I would try and get him, and possibly others in a similar situation, a bed, which I managed to do, though it took two years.

² See note 7, Mandela, p. 559.
[This anecdote of obtaining a bed for Mandela provides an interesting demonstration of how difficult it was – and possibly still is – to determine how certain improvements were obtained. In an interview given in London in 1978, former Robben Island inmate "Mac" Maharaj was asked about the prison conditions on Robben Island. To the question "What kind of cell does Mandela have?", Maharaj answered:

He has been living in a concrete cell, outside walls of grey stone 7 ft by 7 ft and about 9 ft high. It was lit with one 40 watt globe. It had originally no furnishings except for a bed roll and mat, no bench, no table, nothing. Then as a result of demands made by us some were provided with small tables 2 ft by 2 ft 6 in and later on it was extended to all the prisoners in that section and they built post office type counters against the wall without benches, you had to stand and work. They then provided benches and one wooden shelf, just a plank to keep your books on but we ourselves got cardboard paper and plastic and made cupboards for ourselves. Somewhere around 1973-74 when Nelson was ill he was granted a bed for the first time, so in his cell there is a bed. Then I think, oh yes, as a result of his back trouble he received a chair instead of a bench.  

However, ICRC reports would reveal to researchers that benches (and, later, chairs), tables, thicker mats (and, later, beds) were all express requests put – often repeatedly, year after year – by ICRC delegates at all possible levels of intervention: Prison Director, Director of Prisons, Minister of Justice and Prisons. In the case of this "special" bed for Mandela, I asked for it on my first visit, in May 1973. In May 1974, according to my report, five prisoners had been granted beds but, as far as Dominique Dufour remembers, not Mandela. However, in April 1975, Madiba did have a bed ... but I cannot remember if I told him how much we had to insist for him to receive it.]

Mandela's comments were included in my final report and recommendations to the authorities, submitted orally and in writing and at various levels, so that it is not easy to reconstruct what part of these conclusions and proposals came from him and/or from our own – and other prisoners' – observations. What I do remember from our conversation are the following points, on which he insisted:

- He was glad that long trousers had been obtained for all black prisoners, who – previously – had only had short ones (this had been obtained in 1969 by Hoffmann and Senn ... at minister's level). He was also appreciative of the fact that each prisoner now had his own outfit, to be washed by himself, rather than the standard-issue (often ill-fitting) clothing (this had been obtained by Senn). But he added that each prisoner should have two sets of his own clothes. (On this point, "Mac" Maharaj recounts: "The authorities surprised us somewhere round 1972-73 by calling us one day and issuing each man two pairs of trunks and two vests. Then a few weeks later the Red Cross arrived. Those vests were left with us and were replaced for about one year but from 1974 we couldn't get replacements for the vests." (cf. note 3)

- He felt that the warders were too strict in delivering extra "winter" blankets only on 25 April, even if the weather turned colder before that date. To make his point, he told me a recent anecdote about Neville Alexander (another leading prisoner, of very high intellectual capacity but physically rather frail) who had been trying to obtain an extra blanket from a young Boer warder. Alexander had explained that "winter had arrived earlier this year and that it had become cold before April 25th", but the young warder had refused the blanket, adding: "Anyway, where did you get blankets when you were in the bush?" (Alexander later personally confirmed that anecdote to me, as an illustration of the incapacity of many Boer warders to see a human being – and much less a superior

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5 See note 7, Mandela, p. 535.
human being — in a black man, even if the white man was hardly literate and the black one had an M.A.  

- He was particularly insistent on the issue of food: the "racial" (and therefore racist) basis for giving a certain type of food to blacks or to Indians because this was how they supposedly ate "at home" (meaning precisely "back in the bush" or in the so-called "townships"); the poor quality of the basic product and its very, very poor preparation by common criminals who stole whatever edible ingredients there were before cooking for the political prisoners. (This was when the idea was born to propose to the Commanding Officer that the cooks should be chosen from amongst the political prisoners and by the political prisoners, which later made a real difference to the quality of the preparation of the food, as described by Mandela himself in his autobiography.)

- He voiced the prisoners' total lack of interest in and little value of working in the quarry and of the still harsh conditions there and pointed out that it would be more useful for all (including the prison authorities) if inmates were given the possibility of learning a trade and/or of studying, especially those serving long sentences. (On studies, he stressed the difference between certain facilities offered to inmates of his single cell section and the death of opportunities for those in the General or D sections.)

- And, of course, he stressed the importance of obtaining access to news, adding with a smile and a wink: "This would save a lot of time for everybody; for the prisoners, who would no longer need to be so 'creative' in order to try and be informed! And for the warders, who would no longer need to spend so much time trying to prevent the prisoners from knowing what happens outside the prison!"

- Lastly, he spoke at length of the prisoners' relationship with the warders. I can clearly remember: it was at that moment of the conversation that I realized that I was dealing with a truly exceptional human being. He took pains to explain to me who these warders were, almost apologizing for them, stressing how totally "conditioned" they had been by their cultural environment, from their interpretation of the Bible to their history and their language, how incredibly difficult (nay, "unnatural") it was for them to see a human being — and much less an equal — in a black man. He went back to the anecdote about Neville Alexander's blanket and explained: "You have to understand that an answer of this nature is the 'last resort' of someone intellectually and culturally inferior to the prisoner, who knows that he has lost the argument, but who cannot imagine admitting — even to himself — that such is the case. So he goes 'back to basics': he sees the bush in the black man, and only the bush."

And then he added that, beyond every individual's characteristics (for there were also brutes and beasts amongst the warders), a key factor was the Commanding Officer. After telling me about some problems of the Badenhorst period, reminding me that Zugler could witness how the situation had worsened between his 1970 and 1971 visits, he added that "since we managed to get rid of Mr. Badenhorst, there has been an improvement with Colonel Willemsen". He continued by saying that the latter needed to be both "encouraged and supported" in his more humane attitude for, in the long chain of command between him and simple warders, some officers and sub-officers were quite "problematic". And he asked me to stress with Colonel Willemsen the importance of a correct "warder-prisoner" relationship, giving me other specific examples of when such a relationship had been lacking.

Bearing this conversation in mind, it is interesting to quote here what Mandela wrote on this subject:

The most important person in any prisoner's life is not the minister of justice, not the commissioner of prisons, not even the head of prison, but the warder in one's section. If

6 See note 7, Mandela, p. 497.
you are cold and want an extra blanket, you might petition the minister of justice, but you will get no response. If you go to the commissioner of prisons, he will say, ‘Sorry, it is against regulations.’ The head of prison will say, ‘If I give you an extra blanket, I must give one to everyone.’ But if you approach the warder in your corridor, and you are on good terms with him, he will simply go to the stockroom and fetch a blanket.

I always tried to be decent to the warders in my section; hostility was usually self-defeating. There was no point in having a permanent enemy among the warders. It was ANC policy to try to educate all people, even our enemies: we believed that all men, even prison service warders, were capable of change, and we did our utmost to try to sway them.

In general we treated the warders as they treated us. If a man was considerate, we were considerate in return. Not all of our warders were ogres. We noticed right from the start that there were some among them who believed in fairness. Yet being friendly with warders was not an easy proposition, for they generally found the idea of being courteous to a black man abhorrent. Because it was useful to have warders who were well disposed towards us, I often asked certain men to make overtures to selected warders. No one liked to take on such a job.\(^7\)

That first meeting must have lasted a little less than two hours. But as I left Mandela’s cell, I realized that there was something very special about this man: he radiated an exceptional moral authority. Many have written about Nelson Mandela’s moral authority. But I would like to quote here what his comrade in arms and co-prisoner Ahmed Kathrada wrote on the subject for it reflects on our, ICRC, perception of Mandela at the time: “But leader he was, and not by virtue only of the positions to which he had been elected in the ANC and the Youth League before he was banned. From childhood, when he was brought up as a chief, Mandela was groomed to be a leader. Added to that were his political experience, foresight, courage and dynamism. Throughout the period that he operated underground, and during the Rivonia Trial, he displayed the undeniable qualities of leadership, culminating with his address from the dock. Our lawyers, the media, the outside world and all the accused, including Govan, accepted him as the leader, and from the moment we set foot on Robben Island, every prison officer, from the rookies to the generals, treated him as such. So did the International Red Cross and visiting judges, parliamentarians and foreign dignitaries. It was not as though we ever held a meeting and elected him our leader, it was just that the mantle of leadership fell naturally upon his shoulders.”\(^8\)

I then went on to talk, individually, with the other leaders in the single cell section.

At the end of my visit, on May 10, I saw Mandela again, to brief him on what we had seen and done during that visit and to tell him which points we would take up with the Prison Commander.

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[I remember clearly three other people from that first visit to the single cell section: Walter Sisulu (who, I later discovered, was Mandela’s mentor); Ahmed Kathrada, a distinguished Indian scholar who was the prison librarian (and later became President Mandela’s Chef de Cabinet); and Govan Mbeki (whose son Thabo later succeeded Mandela as President of South Africa), a forceful figure who played the guitar, on which I strummed a few chords while talking to him in his cell.

In fact, Mbeki’s guitar – which had been obtained for him after much insistence with the authorities by Philip Zuger – was the centrepiece of a somewhat unusual incident during that first visit of mine to Robben Island. On 10 May, the fourth and final day of our visit, I returned

\(^7\) See note 7, Mandela, p. 497.
to the single cell section, to report back to Mandela on the situation in the General and D sections and to bid farewell to each of the leaders individually. It must have been around 4 p.m. and – this being autumn in the southern hemisphere – it was getting dark; the sky was covered with a low, grey, sad ceiling of clouds and the air was very humid. As I entered the yard, Mbeki was at the far end, his back to the only door, sitting on a bench with his guitar, facing the high wall. I came up quietly behind him; he sensed my presence and turned his head, smiling as he saw me. He stood up courteously and without a word handed me the guitar and invited me to join him on the bench. I took the guitar and did something which was possibly not very “ICRC-like” (if it was not, I hope that there are statutes of limitation): I started humming (softly, for the guard was inside the yard by the door some 40 m away) the tune of a Negro spiritual called “Oh Freedom!” I now know that Govan Mbeki was a declared atheist, but he certainly knew that tune and he started humming along in a beautiful baritone voice. Soon, half a dozen inmates were standing behind us, softly joining in with their superb, low voices. We hummed the song three times and stopped. There was a long silence; everyone stood motionless. I got up, gave Mbeki his guitar back and shook everyone's hand without a word but exchanging a long look with each. There was no embrace; from the door where the guard stood, it must have looked like a very cold, formal, “ICRC-like” goodbye!

(“Did they know the words, or just the tune?” I asked myself as I left the prisoners. I got my answer 31 years later when Sisulu, Mbeki and I sang that spiritual again … in Sisulu’s cell!) But I will save that story for later in Annex III.)

Needless to say, this musical interlude was never mentioned to anyone, nor did it ever “taint” my neutral and impartial attitude towards the South African authorities. I trust also that the level of our voices never reached the ears of either the guard or the BOSS, however sharp they may have been. But the inmates certainly perceived it as a new way of implementing the principle of humanity, even if it was “borderline” by ICRC standards.[]

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Our visit to Robben Island lasted from the morning of 7 May to the evening of 10 May. [During that period, for a capacity of 650, there were 368 inmates, of whom 38 were from South West Africa (Namibia). In terms of accommodation, 289 were in General Section, 50 in D Section and 29 in the single cells or B Section. Of the 368 inmates, 70 had been convicted under the Suppression of Communism Act and 64 under the Terrorism Act and the rest were common law prisoners. In all, 33 prisoners were serving life sentences.]

There is no doubt that, however useful preceding ICRC visits had already been, in the eyes of the inmates this one marked a turning point. For instance, in his book Never Follow the Wolf, Helao Shityuwete writes:

Before the restoration of our privileges we had another visit from the International Committee of the Red Cross. They sent a powerful delegation of four men this time. They were not prepared to compromise with the prison authorities. They had come not only to see the Namibians but also the rest of the prison population and they wanted to listen to personal as well as joint complaints and requests. Discussions would be private and confidential, although some of it had to be known to the prison authorities in order to solve the problems facing us in prison. The delegation was headed by a Dr Moreillon and he proved himself capable. Everyone in the delegation had a specified task to perform. Their visit was crucial and brought a number of really good changes on Robben Island.

Before they left, Dr Moreillon promised us Namibians some financial support because we had no regular contacts with our families and no financial support. He also said he would leave some money for our sport. The prison authorities did not object and for the first time we were able to buy a few things for ourselves. After the ICRC left and we had

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served our six months of deprivation, things started improving. A number of restrictions were removed. Many people were allowed to study. The discriminatory diet was replaced with a non-discriminatory one. We were allowed to go out to work again and sport activities resumed. ... The charges against our four colleagues accused of incitement were dropped, partly as a result of the ICRC's visit but mainly due to the publicity in the press. 10

4. Chapter four: Second meetings with Madiba: 29 May and 1st June 1974

On my second visit to Robben Island, from 29 May to 1 June 1974, I was again accompanied by a team of experienced delegates: Dominique Dufour, who had just completed several series of visits to Palestinian prisoners in Israeli hands, notably with me when I was head of the ICRC delegation in Israel, and who was familiar with the world of prisons and political detainees; Nicolas de Rougemont, also very experienced, who was later to become the "world expert on Robben Island", which he ended up visiting nine times between that 1974 visit and 1983; and Dr Andreas Vischer, with whom I had visited political detainees in what was at the time Rhodesia (Southern Rhodesia) following Ian Smith's Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI), including such inmates as Robert Mugabe and Joshua Nkomo. Never before had the ICRC sent such a large and well-prepared team to the island for, after my visit of 1973, I was absolutely determined to "make a difference" in areas where there had been too few improvements over so many years of ICRC visits, notably availing myself of the fact that Colonel W.H. Willemse was still the Commanding Officer of the prison.

In my meeting with Mandela, on 29 May 1974, on the first day of our visit, I could not resist telling him the anecdote about the hotel porter in Cape Town that had followed my last visit to the island. At first, when I saw his reaction, I was sorry that I had done so: my distinguished "host" evidently felt so awkward that he actually apologized for the behaviour of the good hotel porter! "I am so sorry for you!" he said. "It must have been so embarrassing! But you have to understand these people: they need individuals to whom they can look up, who can make them proud of themselves, who give them hope for the future. And to them, most of us are only known from mouth to ear. They don't even know what we look like. I am actually astonished that he knew me under the name of 'Madiba'. So that, for your porter, meeting someone – especially someone considered as 'trustable' – who has met one of us is something of a wonder!" The reader will note that this already great man avoided saying "I" in such circumstances, but always presented himself as "one amongst other leaders." There was such patent, genuine modesty in his tone. He displayed not an ounce of pride in a story in which he was portrayed and perceived as the absolute hero, just embarrassment that his "guest" had been put in an awkward position and the desire to make him understand why it had happened that way.

I laughed the matter off and simply said that, when I said goodbye to him four days later, I would shake his left hand, saving it for whatever friend of his I met outside and leaving the right one for official contacts, such as with Minister Kruger! He laughed too, and we "shook on it" (with our left hands!) and agreed to call each other Nelson and Jacques, at least in the privacy of his cell. (We can see in Annex III that there was a curious follow-up to this "left handshake" episode after I became Secretary General of World Scouting.)

On that second visit, I had another exchange with Mandela the prisoner that left a lasting impression on me. Before telling this anecdote here, I have to make two cautionary remarks:

- the first is that both Mandela the prisoner and Mandela the President (and especially the latter) is known to have sometimes showed himself forgiving to the point of forgetfulness.

And this anecdote is about a man whom Madiba later considered to be a friend. This white man is now dead (de mortibus nisi bonum), and today Nelson Mandela – unlike some other former Robben Island inmates – seems to preserve only the best memories of him. In fact, those prisoners in B Section who are still alive will recognize who I am talking about and I have checked with some of them that their recollection is the same as mine. And they may agree that, on this one, they know better even than their great friend! But they will keep it to themselves for they are also of the school of thought that one should forgive ... though not forget!

The second remark is that the unnamed officer of whom I speak here was, in his job as mail censor, under the close scrutiny not so much of the prison director but of his real boss, who belonged to the security services: a certain Brigadier Aucamp, whom Mandela mentions twice in his *Long Walk to Freedom.* As to Buntman, she also mentions a number of times the role of Brigadier Aucamp; in particular, she writes that "In formal institutional terms, the Prisons Service was concerned with and responsible for political prisoners. The Prisons Service at times fell under the ambit of its own ministry of prisons, and at times it was under various other ministers, including justice and prisons. Within the Prisons Service, a Security Section linked to the Security Police was established in the early or mid 1960s by Brigadier Aucamp. In practice, the Security Section had the final say on aspects of the incarceration of political prisoners, such as their right to study. Copies of political prisoners' correspondence, or notes or recordings from prisoner meetings with visitors, were sent to this section.*12 For this particular anecdote, the main point is that the warder who had to censor Mandela's mail was certainly more under Aucamp's authority than he would have wished.

With these two cautionary notes, one should be aware that the problem of mail censorship is always a delicate one in any prison. Security requirements make censorship legitimate, but it can also become a tool for mental torture. And, in those days, when the prisoners' mail could not be photocopied before being censored, it was impossible to say if the censorship was legitimate or exaggerated, for the very nature of a censored word, line or paragraph is that one cannot tell what was censored unless one can compare it with a copy of the original. Today, it is easy to photocopy a letter to or from a prisoner, compare the censored version with the original and evaluate the work of the censor. In these years, it was not the case: what was deleted was deleted for ever and the censor's ruling was final.

As I said, cunning and vicious censorship can constitute a form of mental torture: it can transform a love letter to a prisoner into an allusion to a possible lover outside. Deleting a sentence that contains a negation can totally change the meaning of a paragraph. And the prisoner, who has a lot of time to think about these things, broods over them, turns them over in his mind; they become an obsession, a constant strain, and can constitute a nagging, lasting heartbreak ... often for no reason. It is easy to make a mountain out of a molehill when there is too much time to worry about a problem and no way to act upon it.

Some censors are very "good" at this terrible game, and Mandela's censor (or the person instructing that censor) was – at that time – one of the "best". As Madiba spoke to me of this problem, he showed me examples of such censorship in his own mail, in which I could

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11 See note 3, Buntman, pp. 27, 195-196, 211 and 235 for more details on the "Security Section" created in the mid-1960s with the Prison Service under Brigadier Aucamp, but directly linked to the Security Service and with no real reference to the Minister of Justice himself, as well as on Brigadier Aucamp's role with regard to political prisoners. We at the ICRC suspected the importance of that role, but it was not made easily apparent to us. I, for one, have only measured that importance from recent readings. In a personal comment to a private reading of draft V of this study, a former political prisoner wrote to me. "Re.: Aucamp and the role of the Security Police in determining how we were treated. Aucamp first emerges from Zuger's reports but the references almost disqualify him as a role-player, e.g. in the endless hassle about news. But we all knew this was not the case: Aucamp was central to the way we and the Islanders were treated, from the start. To leave him and his masters and servants out is to blur the picture and distort the reality." This former prisoner is no doubt correct. But historical truth forces me to admit that during "my" years (1972-75) in dealing with South Africa, I had not been sufficiently aware of Brigadier Aucamp's central part in the whole process.
immediately spot the ambiguities and double-meanings thus created on sensitive personal issues.

However, as Mandela was putting his case to me, he was so calm, almost detached, that I could not resist making a personal (possibly rather "non-Red Cross") remark but, here again, I hope that statutes of limitation apply!: "I must confess, Nelson, that I am quite amazed at your reaction!" I said. "Here is a man who is evidently persecuting you, trying to harm you where it hurts most ... and you don't seem to hate him!" The great man gave this amazing answer, in his distinguished accent and calm voice, sounding like a member of the London Reform Club sitting in his armchair: "Oh no! You know, Jacques, I rather feel sorry for him: he is one of the last specimens of an extinguishing species ... and he doesn't know it!"

Never did the superiority of the captive over the captor strike me so strongly! Here was this man, a brilliant lawyer, sitting next to me on his prison sisal mat (he still had not received the bed for which I had asked), in his prison garb, in the limited physical space of an inmate's environment, his mind soaring freely in distance and time, foreseeing already the days when those who kept him in custody would be "extinct", not as human beings but in their way of thinking and of relating to the world around them, as a "species".

And then Mandela went on to add something which not only shows a very important specificity of his personality but also explains the true greatness of the man, as well as one of his greatest strengths, as revolutionary, as prisoner, as political leader and as Head of State: "Anyway," he said "hating serves no purpose. It is a self-defeating feeling, for it only hurts the one who hates and not the one who is hated."

There is no doubt that this remarkable capacity of Mandela's not to hate, even in the tough conditions of his detention, coupled with the conviction that his cause was so just that those who thought otherwise were doomed to extinction (in the mental sense of the word), gave him a unique, incomparable, moral strength which, as a free man, he was able to communicate to his people and which saved South Africa from terrible internal troubles. In a sense, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission chaired by Reverend Desmond Tutu was a tangible way of trying to put into action Mandela's mental attitude, already evident when he was imprisoned, at the time when it was most difficult (for him and for any one else) not to hate. Thus, as a "non-hating role model", Nelson Mandela projected in freedom the same wisdom and elevation of the mind which he practiced in detention, which I was privileged to witness on that occasion.

May I add that this anecdote has a moral ending: I spoke of the problem with Colonel Willemsa, in a private and informal interview outside his office, as I thought that such an approach may be more efficient, for my request basically implied him checking on his own subordinate, the censor on whom I knew that Willemsa had, in fact, limited authority. I never knew what direct follow-up the Prison Director actually gave to my intervention, but what I do know is that, over the years, Mandela himself managed to produce a complete "change of heart" in that censor, who thus ceased to be "one of the last specimens of an extinguishing species" to become a respectable representative member of a multicoloured "rainbow" country.

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Interestingly, throughout all my conversations with Mandela the prisoner, he never asked any questions about the fate of white political detainees whom we visited in Pretoria Local prison or of non-white women prisoners in Barbeton prison. Nor did it come to my own mind that I could (should?) brief him in an objective fashion on their treatment. I realize today that my ICRC reflex of total discretion made me exclude that option to the point of not even considering it. However — perhaps strangely and with some contradiction — I felt free to tell him some anecdotes of visits I had paid to "VIP" prisoners in other countries.
Thus it was that, during that second visit in May 1974, I had just completed two weeks in Southern Rhodesia, where we had visited half a dozen places of detention and met such prisoners as Robert Mugabe in Salisbury Remand Jail and Joshua Nkomo in Gonaguingwa/Sengwe prison. As we were speaking about the limits of ICRC prison visits, I told him of an incident which had just occurred in Rhodesia ... and this anecdote must have had a very special interest for him at the time! Why? Today we know from Mandela’s autobiography and many other books that, as of his 57th birthday on 18 July 1975, he started secretly writing (in the space of four months) his prison memoirs, hiding them in his “garden”, where they were later found when a wall was built to separate the leaders in B Section from the opposite punishment cells and segregation section, the purpose of the wall being to prevent communication with inmates in segregation and, more generally, with prisoners from other sections. (This discovery cost Mandela, Sisulu and Kathrada a penalty of suspension of their “study privileges” for four years.) We also now know that copies of those same pages had been hidden by Mac Maharaj in his personal photo album and smuggled out of Robben Island when he was released in 1976.19

Indeed, Mandela may have had his own writings in mind, when, in that month of May 1974, our discussions turned on the role of the ICRC delegates and their relationships with detaining authorities and of the trust which the latter placed in us, our credibility being our most effective tool in obtaining results. To make my point, I told him that I had recently visited Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) and Zimbabwe African People’s Union (ZAPU) leaders in Southern Rhodesia and that one of them (I gave no name ... and I still cannot!) had asked me to smuggle out a book which he had written in prison. The leader had become quite angry when I explained to him that I could not do that, for it would constitute a betrayal of the government’s trust. “Did you calm him down?” Mandela asked. He was quite amused when I told him what I had answered to that imprisoned political leader: “Imagine that, today, I smuggle your book out. Imagine that one day you are President of this country and that you, in turn, have political detainees. Would you let my ICRC successor visit them if I smuggle your book out today?” And the leader did calm down and said: “You’ve got a point!” Mandela asked: “Did you press your advantage?” “Of course,” I replied. “I asked that leader whether, in case he did become President and he did have political detainees ... would he let the ICRC visit them, especially without witness as I was visiting him, and with no personal search of the delegates’ papers?” He had answered that he would “think it over”. Evidently this particular leader was so certain, from the depths of his cell, not only that he would become President, but also that he would have political detainees, that he was not about to make an empty pledge! As one could see: different leaders ... different visions!

I could feel that Madiba was shocked, for he stopped smiling, did not ask me for any further details and we passed on to another subject.

[Although it is not directly related to either Nelson Mandela, nor even to Robben Island, I cannot resist telling here another anecdote linked to attempts at using ICRC delegates to smuggle things in or out of prison.

As we have seen, after improvements in food, work and especially studies had been obtained, the single most important problem for all political prisoners in South Africa was still the total absence of news of the outside world. The only way for prisoners to be updated on what was happening beyond the prison walls was the arrival of new prisoners ... or the smuggling-in of news. The ICRC never contributed to such smuggling for, however strongly we felt (and officially said and wrote) that detainees should have access to news, we would not betray the confidence of the detaining authority, something which the prisoners themselves fully understood, for they never asked us about events taking place outside, particularly in South Africa: anyway they had other ways of endeavouring to know what was happening outside and devoted much time and energy to trying to keep themselves

19 See note 7, Mandela, Chapter 78.
informed, as explained in Mandela’s *Long Walk to Freedom* and other memoirs on life on Robben Island.

This “starvation for news” was felt most strongly by the dozen white prisoners detained in Pretoria Local prison, mainly because, owing to their small number and the absence of “newcomers” (i.e. newly convicted prisoners), there was really no easy way for them to get fresh news of the world. This was made worse by the fact that these particular prisoners were all intellectuals who had been accustomed to being regularly fed with information while free.

Before my second visit to Pretoria Local prison, I met outside South Africa a former white political prisoner who asked me to smuggle to his friends in that jail a very small radio in the form of a pen. I confess that this was a great temptation, for I was fully aware that, short of freedom I could not have brought a more valued, more valuable (and, in fact, more justified and justifiable) gift to these prisoners, who, after all, should have been fully entitled to have news of the world and for whom the ICRC was officially and openly fighting to obtain such entitlement.

Of course, I resisted the temptation, and regretfully refused, arguing: “It is not only a matter of principle but also of efficiency. *Firstly,* in my arguments with the South African authorities, I derive my strength and my capacity to obtain results from the moral ground on which I base myself: any authority I have, any changes I obtain derive from that moral strength. If I feel that (even for a just cause) I am, so to say, “cheating on them”, I shall feel that moral ground as shaky, I shall be less sure of myself, I shall speak with less authority, for that ‘pen’ will burn not only my pocket but, indeed, my conscience! *Secondly,* one day there will be a thorough search in the cells and this ‘pen’ will be discovered. What will be the punishment and for which prisoner? *Thirdly,* soon the battery will run out. How will it be replaced? And will the prisoners not be like drug addicts who have been given their dose for a while ... and then deprived? And *fourthly,* one day South Africa will be a country with ‘one man one vote’; there will be – hopefully – no political detainees any more and the former ones will write their memoirs. It is impossible to guarantee that the story of this ‘radio/pen’, smuggled in by an ICRC delegate, will not be told by one of these former inmates. What will then be the reaction of those governments who, at that time in the future, will still have their political detainees and will either have ICRC delegates visiting them or will be considering opening their prisons to the ICRC?”

The former inmate did not insist but, today, I choose to tell the story *myself*, precisely in order to reassure those countries that allow the ICRC to visit their political detainees that the delegates will not “cheat on them”.

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During that May 1974 visit, I had a conversation with Mandela on a subject that interested him immensely: the Conference on the Reaffirmation and Development of International Humanitarian Law (CDDH), which had just opened in Geneva. For him to better understand the subject, I introduced him to a few basic notions about the rules of war, or “international humanitarian law” (IHL). “In fact,” I told him, “the first law of war is the ‘right to kill’, in the sense that a soldier killing a fighting enemy soldier in an international armed conflict between two States is not committing a crime, whereas the same person committing the same act in peacetime would be charged with murder. IHL tries to limit this ‘shooting licence’ by promoting a basic rule for the military: ‘Thou shalt not kill whomever cannot (or can no longer) kill you.’ This means that the wounded soldier or the shipwrecked sailor, the surrendering or captured military prisoner, the civilian (whether interned or in occupied territory) are all protected – at least in theory – by IHL, as are those who tend to them, such as medical staff, the Red Cross or priests.” I added: “IHL is always one war late. It is like the generals who ‘prepare for the last war’: it mends the wounds which it could not prevent in the previous war! The Geneva Convention of 1864 (which protects the wounded and the sick on
the battlefield and which created the Red Cross both as a protective emblem and as a neutral aid organisation to assist these fallen soldiers) was conceived to protect the 40,000 dying (and in the end dead) soldiers that Henry Dunant was not able to save on the battlefield of Solferino in 1859. Similarly, a third Geneva Convention of 1929 was adopted to protect the prisoners of war who had no real legal protection in the First World War. And the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949 was meant to protect the civilians (whether interned or in occupied territory) who could not be protected during the Second World War.”

Mandela interrupted: “Does it protect the civilian population from air bombings, as in Vietnam?” … which gave me to think that he knew more than he was supposed to about the outside world, a point which I kept to myself!

“Precisely not!” I answered. “Because, as I said, IHL is always one war late. And, in 1949, right after the mass aerial bombings of the Second World War, it was unthinkable for the victors to prohibit practices which, they felt, had been legitimately used against the Nazis only a few years before. But now the time may be ripe to catch up with this.”

The prisoner interrupted again: “But these are all international wars. What about civil wars and wars of liberation?”

“That is exactly where we are right now,” I answered. “Whereas, as a result of the Spanish Civil War, non-international armed conflicts are mentioned in common article 3 to the four Geneva Conventions of 1949, which has been declared applicable in the recent civil war in Nigeria, such is not the case for wars of liberation … at least not yet.”

His eyes were glittering: “Do you mean to say that, one day and if we were to stay here longer, we could get POW status?”

“In theory, yes,” I replied. “But only in theory. For you to achieve that status would imply, under the new IHL, firstly that wars of liberation be recognized as ‘international armed conflicts’, secondly that freedom fighters – who mostly fight without uniforms, even when carrying arms openly – would qualify as ‘combatants’ and thirdly, most importantly and possibly least likely, that South Africa would adhere to that new law. But the first two points are being discussed in an international conference right now in Geneva.” And I told him that, on 19 February of that same year (“the very day our first son, Arnaud, was born” I added!), the CDDH had opened in Geneva and that these points were amongst the key issues being discussed.

He commented: “Well, I guess that South Africa will need to become a democracy before signing that type of agreement … and, by that time, we shall be free and shall no longer need it!” And he laughed heartily!

Mandela then became serious again and said: “What about South Africa recognizing us formally, if not as POWs, at least as ‘political prisoners’, with the same facilities – in particular access to news and contact visits with our family – that political prisoners (such as Robert Sobukwe) normally enjoy.”

I told him that, at that stage, it seemed highly unlikely that the authorities would grant the "poquos" (as political prisoners were colloquially called by the authorities) such a status. I added that the ICRC, for its part, could not and would not ask for them to be given this status, as this would immediately be perceived as a political stand and would jeopardize not only our standing as a purely humanitarian organization but also our chances of obtaining improvements in their conditions of detention. I reminded him that our main line of argument was that he and his comrades should be treated at least as well as common criminals. It was for similar reasons, I told him, that – unlike Amnesty International – we would not ask for the release even of prisoners who had renounced the use of violence.

“I understand this perfectly,” he responded, a bit curtly. “I was only asking for your personal opinion and not for any action by the ICRC! As for the use of violence, how can any of us
renounce it, when the State itself uses it as a permanent tool to oppress a majority by a minority?" Then, softening his tone and with a whimsical smile, he added: "The ICRC cannot ask, I know, for either our release or for us to be granted official status of political prisoners. But we can! In fact, I did! I have asked for both, some time ago already! But, of course, without much hope of a positive result!"

I refrained from asking for more detail, and it was only much later that I learnt that, in a letter from Robben Island and addressed to the Minister of Justice, dated 22 April 1969 (and only published by the ANC in 1978), he had argued and asked for the release of all political prisoners and, pending such release, that they be "treated as political prisoners". This meant, he had specified, that they "should be provided with good diet, proper clothing outfit, bed and mattress, newspapers, radios, bioscope" (meaning cinema) and "better contact with our families here and abroad"… all things which the ICRC was also requesting on their behalf (except, of course, the status of political prisoners) but which took years to obtain.

Our discussion went on about the law of war, and Mandela was interested to learn that, during the Algerian war, General Raoul Salan, Commander of the French forces, had made a difference in the treatment of Algerian "rebels" who were captured while fighting with their weapons in hand and those who did not carry arms openly. "And in Vietnam?" he asked. I told him that, while a young delegate there in 1966, I had proposed to the Americans that they follow Salan's example, which they did, but went even further by stating that those "Viet Cong" and other North Vietnamese captured while fighting with weapons in hand should be treated as POWs. (Little did I know then that this would become article 44 – on irregular combatants – of the 1977 Protocol I additional to the Geneva Conventions of 1949! But that is another story.)

I also mentioned to him my participation, as ICRC Delegate-General for Africa, in a seminar organized in Dar es Salaam by the Organization of African Unity's (OAU) "Coordinating Committee for the Liberation of Africa", prior to the start of the CDDH, from 21 to 25 January 1974. That meeting, to which the Swiss government (as host country of the CDDH) and the ICRC (as the main drafter of the Additional Protocols) had been invited, had two objectives: firstly, to discuss the status of liberation movements at the CDDH and, secondly, to review the substance of those parts of the draft texts which concerned them. Ten out of the thirteen liberation movements recognized by the OAU had attended, amongst them, of course, his own African National Congress of South Africa (ANC) (Mr R. Mazimba and Mr S. Matifi) and the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC) (Mr E.L. Ntloedibe and Mr K.M. Nkula), as well as 11 OAU Member States, with the Swiss and Norwegian governments and the ICRC as observers. For me, it had been a fascinating event, not only because of the matters that were discussed there, but also because it was my first meeting with all the free representatives of those movements whose members I was visiting in prisons, such as Frente de Libertação de Moçambique (FRELIMO) in Mozambique (Joaquim A. Chissano was leading their delegation), ZANU and ZAPU in Rhodesia/Zimbabwe, the Movimente Popular de Libertação de Angola (MPLA) and Frente Nacional de Libertação de Angola (FNLA) in Angola.

We must have talked for about three hours, and I can confess today that we briefly embraced as we parted … behaviour which, I am afraid, was again not very "ICRC like". (But, do not worry: it was not visible to anyone else, especially not the warders!)

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14 See note 52, Mandela, The struggle is my life, p. 187.
As I had done the previous year, at the end of our visit, on June 1st 1974, I went back to Mandela to brief him on what we had seen and what we would do. This was our fourth meeting and I remember it as particularly relaxed and cordial.

5. Third meetings with Madiba: 21 and 25 April 1975

I paid my third visit to Robben Island from 21 to 25 April 1975, again with Dominique Dufour and Nicolas de Rougemont and, this time, with Dr Müller as ICRC doctor. A new Commanding Officer had been in charge since 1 December 1974, a Lieutenant Colonel H.J. Roelofse; but the representative of the Director of Prisons, Colonel G.L. Steytler, was our main interlocutor during that visit.

At the time, I knew that it could well be my last visit to South African prisons, for I was about to take over from Jean Pictet as Director of Principles and Law at the ICRC, a position which the Committee entrusted to me on 21 May 1975. In fact, it was because this nomination was, so to speak, "in the pipeline" that I brought my visit to South Africa forward by one month. The knowledge gave an even more personal turn to my, by then, "regular" interview without witness with Mandela, as it was likely to be the last one ... at least while he was in prison.

When I told Mandela that it may be my last visit to him, he inquired about my possible successor, kindly adding: "You and your team are making such a difference, Jacques. We would be worried that your successor may not do as much." I told him that Dufour and de Rougemont would ensure continuity, that I hoped to be able to influence the choice of my successor and that I would brief him in detail. I felt confident that he would follow the same line as I had.

He then asked me how I personally felt about this possible change of position. I confessed to him honestly that I was rather looking forward to not spending so much time visiting detainees, adding that – since our first son was born in February 1974 – I tended to identify too much with the pain of prisoners who were separated from their children, particularly in South Africa where prisoners were not allowed to even see these children before they were 16. I felt this to be so unbearable for the detainees that it had become hard for *me* to bear. I felt like a medical doctor who, when going home, could not stop thinking about his patients and I feared that it would affect my efficiency as a delegate, by making me appear too much as "the advocate of the enemy" to the authorities. I was pushing so hard on certain issues that I felt some authorities had started to perceive me as the advocate of the prisoners' *cause*, not just of their sufferings. That personal trend had started with the birth of my son, from whom I was separated almost six months of the year, and I admitted to looking forward to being more in Geneva and, in principle, no longer visiting jails in my new position.

When I think of this exchange today, I feel a mixture of shame and wonder. "Wonder" because we had swapped roles: it was as if he was visiting *me* in prison! His general attitude was such that *he* had become the Red Cross delegate with whom one shares one's problems! But he showed such genuine interest, and his question on how I felt about this professional change had been put in such a natural – yet discreet, unimposing – way that I did feel like "confessing" my true feelings to him, probably also because I felt guilty about such feelings, for they were putting my comfort ahead of the prisoners', and I possibly had a need to receive some kind of "absolution" from him (a noteworthy instinct for a protestant!). Hence today's feeling of shame.

Mandela no doubt felt this and said: "I understand this so well. You should feel no guilt about it. It is a credit to your conscience that you should identify so much with us and others like us." He paused and added, smiling: "I guess that we here are well placed to understand you!", but made no allusion to the pain he had felt when his son Thembi had died in a car crash in 1969, something he had never mentioned to me and which I did not know at the time, although I should have.
He just pursued the conversation and asked me about my wife, noting how hard it must be on her that I should be absent almost half of the year. I truly no longer remember the detail of that conversation, but I have to tell here an anecdote about my most recent meeting with Madiba, on 23 April 2004, on which I will give other details later. As I was entering his office in the Nelson Mandela Foundation, in Houghton, on that day, accompanied by other people including my wife, and as I introduced her to him, Madiba said: "So you are the one who did not say 'yes' to Jacques' first proposal?" My wife, Marie-Claude, was quite astonished and when we came out, she asked: "When on earth – and why – did you tell him that you proposed twice to me before I accepted?" I told her the truth: I did not have the slightest ideal. But today, as I collect my memory to write these lines, I realize that the only possible explanation is that I must have told this to Mandela the prisoner, in his cell, in May 1975, and this incredible man, who has been able to forget the harm caused him by his censor, was able to remember this piece of information 29 years later, at the age of almost 86! However, there is an explanation for this, which I shall relate later when describing our meeting in Oslo in August 1990. It has to do with what Mandela told me then about how prisoners mentally "film" the visits of ICRC delegates.

During that visit, I also told him that, on 11 December 1974, I had visited fallen Emperor Halle Selassie, detained by the Ethiopian revolutionary "Dergue" in the house where he used to live as a Crown Prince. It had been quite a strange visit because it had been difficult for me to determine how much the Emperor was aware of his situation, given his advanced age. But I have to wait a few years before I can tell that story!

***

On the more "professional" side of that last "prison dialogue" in 1975 with Mandela, I have to relate another important moment, both for the ICRC and for me. As usual, we went through, item by item, the various aspects of the prisoners' conditions of detention. We noted that progress had been made on food, work and, especially, studies; but we also noted that things were slow to improve on grading, hot water and, especially, access to news. On these, and various other points, he was particularly appreciative that, in the single cell section, a 270-litre electric boiler had just been installed (the month of our visit ... "as a gift to the International Red Cross, no doubt!" he commented with a smile). But he was concerned that other sections did not yet benefit from hot water. I told him that, according to information I had received (for this was a point on which I had strongly insisted, as had Zuger and Senn before me), the Prison Department had purchased, at high cost, a water-softening system which was to be delivered to the island in May or June 1975. After the two or three months needed for installation and trial runs, the device should soften the island water and permit its introduction into the existing pipes linking the two oil-fired boilers in the kitchen and the various sections of the maximum security prison. Security prisoners on the island should therefore shortly be able to wash themselves and do their laundering with hot water, for the first time in 14 years. He was delighted with this news.

He also expressed his appreciation of other improvements in the single cell section, namely:

- The windows of the recreation hall had been equipped with hinges and could be opened so as to improve ventilation.
- A garden measuring 20 x 1.20 m had been set up in the courtyard. A 1-metre-high fence protected flowers from being damaged by balls used in the nearby playground. Some "ganglies" had also been planted.
- The small tennis court in the courtyard was being enlarged to allow volleyball to be played.
- A new type of lampshade, which cast troublesome shadows at night, had been replaced by the older and more satisfactory type.
He was also glad that, owing to his back troubles, we had (finally!) obtained a bed for him, but he was evidently embarrassed by the fact that he and a few others in the single cell section should be the only ones to have beds ("borrowed" from the hospital and issued on medical grounds) in the entire prison. "This should be a standard for all prisoners," he insisted. I told him that I had been pushing for this and that I (or my successor if necessary) would continue to do so.

Clothes being, as he said, "a matter of personal dignity", he noted with satisfaction that all inmates had been issued with an extra pair of socks, another safari shirt, a second pair of shoes and extra gumboots for those who worked outside.

One of his main concerns and cause of dissatisfaction – apart from the major and constant problem of the absence of news – was the question of visits. The prisoners had calculated that, over all, they received an average of one visit per prisoner per year on the island. (We were able to confirm this later: in 1973 there had been 438 visits for an average of 370 political detainees; in 1974 there had been 364 for some 340; and between 1 January and 20 April 1975, there had been 92 visits for 291 prisoners at the time of our visit.) He stressed that the prisoners clearly resented the difficulty they had in securing visits by friends or relatives other than their immediate families.

Firstly, they felt that they were faced with a deliberate policy of isolating them from the outside world on the pretext of security. Secondly, they felt that limiting visits to members of their direct families meant that no account was taken of the customs of the black population of South Africa, for whom the concept of "family" was much broader than for people of European descent. Thirdly, they thought that the present rule was in direct contradiction to the spirit and the letter of Article 110 (Chapter II) of the Prisoners' Act, which laid down that "special attention shall be given to the preservation of the good relationship between a prisoner and members of his family in the bet interests of both parties." They contested the argument that Article 82 of the same Act justified the present policy, as put forward by the Commanding Officer over the intercom on 8 March 1974, and as the Head Warder had confirmed to the assembled inmates of the single cell section on 14 March 1974. He also made a strong argument in favour of a "special right" which political prisoners should have to receive visits not just from family members but, indeed, from friends for, he said, "for a political detainee his closest family is constituted by those who think as he does." I could not resist telling him that, in claiming this, he was in good company, reminding him the anecdote (in Luc, Chapter 8 ... as I later checked!) in which Jesus – when told that his mother and brothers cannot reach him because of the density of the crowd – had answered that his mother and brothers were those who listen to his word! To which he laughed heartily, hinting that I had little chance of success at convincing the authorities of his views on the subject!

Lastly, what I call "an important moment, both for the ICRC and for me" came when we spoke of those areas, such as grading, visits and, more particularly, access to news, in which, despite repeated efforts not only on my part but since the times of Zuger and even Senec, we seemed to be making little or no progress. I said that I was wondering whether the ICRC should not tell the South African authorities that we would suspend our visits until marked improvements had taken place in these three areas. Mandela shot back, very fast and very firmly: "Never do that! They will call your bluff and you will put them in a position to say 'We do not prohibit ICRC visits. It is the ICRC that has stopped visiting.' Always remember that what matters is not only the good you bring, but also the bad you prevent."

Not only did the ICRC follow this excellent piece of advice in South Africa and elsewhere, but I have often remembered – and, indeed quoted – that pertinent remark to ICRC delegates when they felt frustrated in their efforts and feared that, in the absence of any public comments made by the ICRC on some unsatisfactory aspect of detention, the institution could be used by a government as an alibi for a situation which we could not influence as
much as we wanted. This is a cross which we have to bear, always remembering that it is the
detainees themselves who would "pay the price" for our absence, be it voluntary or not.

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[Just as I realized that I had not done my homework when I became aware that Nelson
Mandela's name was "Madiba" for his people or that he had lost his son while in prison,
similarly I had not sufficiently studied his life to know how close he was to another political
detainee, a white man sentenced to "natural life" (meaning, under South African law, that he
was to die in prison) and detained in Pretoria Local prison: Bram Fischer.

To quote the back cover of Martin Meredith's Fischer's Choice:

Bram Fischer was born into an aristocratic Afrikaner family but became one of South
Africa's leading revolutionaries. Regarded in his youth as having a brilliant career ahead
of him, he rebelled not only against the apartheid system but also against his own
Afrikaner people. "Bram followed the most difficult course any person could choose to
follow", said his friend Nelson Mandela. "I fought only against injustice not against my
own people."

As a defence lawyer, Fischer managed to save Mandela from the death penalty
demanded by state prosecutors for his sabotage activities. But what was equally
remarkable was the role Fischer played in the underground movement aimed at
overthrowing the government. To the very last, even when all the other conspirators had
been arrested or had fled into exile, Fischer held out, attempting a lonely, defiant stand
against the government, sought for months on end by the security police.

His single-handed efforts ended inevitably in failure. Sentenced to life imprisonment, he
was cast into solitary confinement where vengeful Afrikaner guards tried to break his
spirit. The government continued to regard him as a potentially dangerous influence even
when he was dying of cancer, unable to walk without assistance, refusing all appeals to
release him until the last few weeks of his life.17

I visited Bram Fischer three times in detention: in Pretoria Local prison on 1 May 1973 and
27 May 1974, and in Bloemfontein on 30 April 1975, in his brother's home, where Fischer
died of cancer on 8 May, one week after my visit, technically still a prisoner, which was the
reason why I was allowed to pay him an "official" visit in a private home.

The point here was that Fischer was one of the persons closest to Mandela, his comrade in
arms and his lawyer at the Rivonia trial.18 Again, I should have known all this. For, apart from
freedom and access to news (in that order) nothing would have been more precious to
Mandela than having news of his brother Bram, nor to Fischer than to know how Madiba was
faring. But not only was I unaware of their close relationship (once again a professional
mistake, as I see it today) but also, or even worse, I was so entrenched in my strict
interpretation of ICRC confidentiality that it never occurred to me that I could let inmates of
Robben Island know how their comrades at Pretoria Local (or Barbeton in the case of
women) were doing, and vice versa. Yet on 1 May 1973, we were in Pretoria and a week
later, from 7 to 10 May, on Robben Island. In 1974, the same sequence: 27 May in Pretoria
and two days later, from 29 May to 1 June, on Robben Island. In 1975, it was the reverse: we
started with Cape Town (21 to 25 April), were in Pretoria on 28 April and, as I said earlier, I
visited Fischer at his brother's home on 30 April in Bloemfontein, a week before he died and
five days after I had last spoken to Mandela. On all three occasions, I could have brought at
least oral greetings from some to the others. Just greetings! Nothing that would have
endangered prison security. But no! Just as we would not relay to the prisoners news from

18 See note 7, Mandela, pp. 561-562, where Mandela tells how he learnt of the death of Bram Fischer through Winnie, his wife,
when she visited him in prison.
the outside world, which we openly fought for them to receive officially, I never thought of transmitting personal greetings from prison to prison!

When I later realized what treasures I had omitted to share with these prisoners in both places of detention, I felt so bad that I apologized for it three times to Madiba, for it was too late to apologize to Bram.

On 27 February 1995, as Secretary General of the World Organization of the Scout Movement (WOSM), I wrote to Nelson Mandela as President of the Republic of South Africa, asking him, in the name of the Boy Scouts of South Africa, to become their Patron, after having assured myself informally – through Ahmed Kathrada, then his Chef de Cabinet, and former librarian on Robben Island – that the President would accept that invitation. To that official letter, I added two postscripts, one typed, one by hand. The typed one read: “I have just finished reading Long walk to Freedom. How fascinating and truly educational, in the deepest sense. On Robben Island, there would be so much to say on what we, the Red Cross, tried to do. But I shall deal about that with Ahmed Kathrada.” And I added: “One immense regret I have: it is only now that I realise how personally close you were to Bram Fischer. Had I been aware of this, I would have given you news of him, as I would see him normally one week before I would visit you. With retrospect, I tell myself that we were too discreet on these matters, that we stuck too closely to the rule. I think that I was the last ‘outsider’ to see him, in his brother’s house, on April 30th 1975. But then, my visit to Robben Island that year had been from April 21st to 25th … and I should have given him news about you. I am really sorry I didn’t.”

The handwritten postscript went as follows: “It may interest you to know for the sake of memories, that Scouts, when greeting their Scout brothers and sisters, shake the left hand.” (See above Chapter four.) It is worth noting that, by letter of 19 May 1995, President Mandela informed us (the South African Scout Association and myself as WOSM Secretary General) that he was: “honoured to accept the position of Patron of the South African Scout Association.”

In London, on 10 July 2003, I was invited to present former President Mandela with a Humanitarian Award in the name of the British Red Cross. (I shall refer again to that event in Chapter seven.) In my short public address to Madiba, I recalled a number of anecdotes, which I mention in these pages, and one of them was on my last visit to Bram Fischer: Bram was brought in a wheelchair into his brother’s drawing room where I was waiting. He could not move his legs; his arms also seemed to be paralysed; his face was of stone; his mouth was shut and only his eyes looked alive. I lent over to him and asked: “Bram! This is Jacques. Do you recognize me?” He stared at me and I was not sure that I could read an answer in his eyes. So I unpinioned my big plastic ICRC badge from the front pocket of my jacket and held it in front of him, the Red Cross 10 inches from his face. Then something very gripping happened: slowly, ever so slowly, Bram Fischer lifted his right arm and his crippled hand, took the badge with three shaky middle fingers (though not the thumb, as that was too paralysed) and, at the cost of an immense effort, slowly, unbearably slowly, brought the badge to his heart, glaring at me in paralysed silence! I still have the shivers as I write these lines.

When I went to see Madiba in Houghton/Johannesburg in April 2004 I thought of what I could give him which would be of any value to a man like him. So I gave him that ICRC badge, which was the last thing that his brother and comrade Bram had held to his dying heart. I shall keep for ever in my own heart the look that Madiba gave me at that moment, his face as close to mine as Bram’s had been on 30 April 1975.

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To go back to 1975, at the end of our April visit I briefed Mandela, as I had done the two previous times, on progress made, problems unsolved and points to be taken up with the
authorities. As we parted on this, our sixth conversation in two years, we were both keenly aware that it may be a long time before we would meet again. (It was to be 15 years!) But, of course, nothing was said on the subject and we just embraced warmly, as "old friends" would. How could we know that 20 years later, in February 1995, we would be together again in the same cell ... but he as President of the Republic of South Africa and I, for the occasion, with the title of Vice-President of the ICRC!
## List of ICRC visits to Robben Island Prison from 1963 to 1986

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DATE</th>
<th>DELEGATES</th>
<th>NUMBER OF PRISONERS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>27 September 1963</td>
<td>Georg Hoffmann</td>
<td>R. Sobukwe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 May 1964</td>
<td>Georg Hoffmann</td>
<td>1,395</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5–10 April 1967</td>
<td>Geoffrey Cassian Senn</td>
<td>996</td>
</tr>
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<td>25–26 August 1967</td>
<td>Geoffrey Cassian Senn</td>
<td>975</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7–9 October 1967</td>
<td>Geoffrey Cassian Senn and Dr Simon Burckhardt</td>
<td>966</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8–10 May 1969</td>
<td>Philip Zuger, Geoffrey Cassian Senn and Dr François Vuillet</td>
<td>640</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24–29 November 1970</td>
<td>Philip Zuger and Dr Roland Marti</td>
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<tr>
<td>2–6 November 1971</td>
<td>Philip Zuger</td>
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<tr>
<td>7–10 May 1973</td>
<td>Jacques Moreillon, Roger Santschy and Dr Edoardo Leuthold</td>
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<tr>
<td>29 May–1 June 1974</td>
<td>Jacques Moreillon, Dominique Dufour, Nicolas de Rougemont and Dr Andreas Vischer</td>
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<td>21–24 April 1975</td>
<td>Jacques Moreillon, Dominique Dufour, Nicolas de Rougemont and Dr Stefan Müller</td>
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<td>26–30 April 1976</td>
<td>Frank Schmidt, Dominique Dufour, Harald Schmid de Gruneeck, Nicolas de Rougemont and Dr Andreas Vischer</td>
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<tr>
<td>29 March–2 April 1977</td>
<td>Frank Schmidt, Dominique Dufour, Harald Schmid de Gruneeck, Nicolas de Rougemont and Dr Andreas Vischer</td>
<td>359</td>
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<tr>
<td>16–20 January 1978</td>
<td>Frank Schmidt and Jean-Marc Bomet</td>
<td>405</td>
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<tr>
<td>25–29 September 1978</td>
<td>Frank Schmidt, Roger Santschy, François Néri and Dr Andreas Vischer</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>DATE</td>
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<tr>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>13–18 August 1979</td>
<td>Frank Schmidt, Roger Santschy, Nicolas de Rougemont and Dr Marcel Dubouloz</td>
<td>466</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13–18 October 1980</td>
<td>Roger Santschy, Nicolas de Rougemont, Peter Lütolf, Jean-Charles Délèze and Dr Andreas Keller</td>
<td>494</td>
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<tr>
<td>5–10 September 1981</td>
<td>Jean-Marc Bornet, Nicolas de Rougemont, Paul Früh and Dr Jörg Nagel</td>
<td>473</td>
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<tr>
<td>5–9 September 1982</td>
<td>Nicolas de Rougemont, Dieter Pfaff, Olivier Dürr, Pierre de Cocatrix and Dr Jörg Nagel</td>
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<tr>
<td>29 August–2 September 1983</td>
<td>Nicolas de Rougemont, André Collomb, Dieter Pfaff, Werner Schläpfer, Adrian Kübler and Dr Jörg Nagel</td>
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<tr>
<td>27–31 August 1984</td>
<td>Philippe Comtesse, Werner Schläpfer, Pierre Delacoste, Olivier Cingria, André Collomb and Dr Christophe Bolliger</td>
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<tr>
<td>2–6 September 1985</td>
<td>Philippe Comtesse, Paul Grossrieder, Pierre Delacoste, Jean-Philippe Lavoyer, Daniel Züst and Dr Christophe Bolliger</td>
<td>Beginning of visit: 233 End of visit: 236</td>
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<tr>
<td>8–12 September 1986</td>
<td>Angelo Gnaedinger, Ann Schwarz, Olivier Courvoisier, Francine Fassa-Recrosio, Gianfranco Soldati and Dr Hans-Werner Jaun</td>
<td>Beginning of visit: 267 End of visit: 263</td>
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Bibliography

* Indicates that the work is quoted in this book.


Further conversations with Madiba

I had the pleasure and privilege of seeing Nelson Mandela – as a free man – seven more times. These meetings – which took place in 1990, 1992, 1994, 1995, 2003 and 2004 (plus two phone conversations in 1999) – were of varying importance and took place in different countries. The main interest of sharing them here is that they deal with such a legendary figure and that they took place with our "common" prison experience as a backdrop.

9 June 1990

Nelson Mandela was freed on 11 February 1990, and one of the first things he did was to embark on a series of visits to numerous countries, be it to say "thank you" to those who had supported him or his cause while he was in prison or to convince others to help South Africa become truly democratic. He came to Geneva in June 1990. A visit to the ICRC had been planned, but he had to postpone it, owing to his exhaustion from his many previous interviews. Thus a meeting was arranged for the next day – 9 June 1990 – at the premises of the World Council of Churches, which had brought a lot of pressure to secure his release.

In 1988, I had left my position of Director-General at the ICRC to become Secretary General of the WOSM. However, I had stayed with the ICRC, as one of the 20-25 volunteer members of the Committee, which is the governing body of the institution. Thus the then President of the ICRC, Dr Cornellio Sommaruga, kindly asked me to accompany him to his meeting with Mandela, for he had heard that I had visited him in difficult times on Robben Island.

I confess that I was quite excited by – and immensely looking forward to – this meeting. Fifteen long years had passed since we had last seen each other. Would he still remember me? After all, he had been visited by many other ICRC delegates since then, some of them many times. (For instance, as said earlier, Nicolas de Rougemont visited him nine times between 1974 and 1983.) Moreover, this was not "our" meeting: it was the meeting of the President of the ICRC with the ICRC’s most famous former "client". (Also present were Paul Grossrieder – who had visited Mandela once in prison, in 1985, and was later to become Director-General of the ICRC – and Henry Fournier, ICRC desk officer.)

When we were introduced into the room where Mandela and his wife Winnie were, together with Thabo Mbeki, I was struck by how little changed he seemed. President Sommaruga and Nelson Mandela greeted each other and then the former inmate of cell number 5 of B Section turned to me and said, in a most friendly manner: "Oh, Dr Moreillon! How nice to see you again!" in exactly the same tone he had used to welcome me to his cell on my second and third visits to Robben Island! And then, still holding my hand, he looked at Cornellio Sommaruga and said: "You know, Mr President, these people, your delegates ... their presence was vital for us while we were in prison. Truly, they helped us keep our sanity."

I read (and translate) from the notes taken on that day by Henry Fournier that Mr Mandela:

wished to express his great gratitude towards the ICRC, its professionalism and efficiency. He added that only a detainee could understand how salutary and essential ICRC visits were. He was happy to be able to catch up with yesterday's missed meeting to officially thank the ICRC in the name of all ANC detainees, whether free or still in prison. He also personally thanked Mr Moreillon and Mr Grossrieder who had visited him in prison and exchanged with them souvenirs which testifed to the intact memory which he keeps of these visits.

As Mandela and the President of the ICRC talked and I looked on and listened, I remember thinking that I had met many heads of State and other VIPs in my career, but that of these there were only three who had the kind of personality that could "fill a room" the moment they entered it: Golda Meir, John Paul II and, indeed, Nelson Mandela. The difference was that
this man had shown this capacity when he was the underdog, when this immense gift that today could fill a stadium then only filled a small concrete cell. President Dwight D. Eisenhower, who had very much impressed me when he received us as American Field Service exchange students at the White House in 1958, used to say: “Charisma is that unique quality that shines through ten layers of hierarchy.” Of course, he was speaking as a military man. I would say, with Nelson Mandela in mind, that charisma is a combination of exceptional inner strength and the capacity to convey that inner strength to others by one’s sheer presence. And in Mandela’s case “myth and reality” are not so far removed from each other, even though he always insists that he is “no angel”. (On this, I recommend the very good “Prologue” of Anthony Sampson’s official biography of Mandela.)

This meeting (which mostly dealt with the ICRC’s ongoing concerns in South Africa) ended with a press conference, about which Fournier wrote in the notes:

To conclude, Mr and Mrs Mandela were keen to publicly declare their gratitude to the ICRC for its work in prisons, and the ANC Vice-President added that he would seek all opportunities given to him to stress the importance and the value of this work with those leaders whom he would be called upon to meet within his mandate, as long as this would not constitute an interference in internal affairs of the States concerned.

27 August 1990

As a member of the ICRC Directorate – be it Director of the Department of Principles and Law or, later, Director-General – I usually represented the institution at gatherings organized for Nobel Prize winners, since the first ever Nobel Prize had been awarded, in 1901, to Henry Dunant, founder of the Red Cross, and the ICRC itself had received it in 1917, 1944 and 1963. From 26 to 29 August 1990, such a gathering was organized in Oslo jointly by the Elie Wiesel Foundation for Humanity and the Norwegian Nobel Committee on the theme of “Anatomy of Hate: Resolving Conflict through Dialogue and Discussion”.

Participants were seated by alphabetical order. Thus, as chance would have it, between Mandela and Moreillon, were placed the names of President François Mitterrand, who, in fact, never sat there but did speak from the podium, and Adam Michnik, former Polish political detainee and Editor-in-Chief of Poland’s largest independent newspaper. As the table was rectangular and we four happened to be seated two either side of a corner, Madiba and I were seated quite close to each other. We greeted each other with a discreet nod and, while the meeting was going on, I passed a note to him through Michnik, on which I had scribbled: “Do you think that you can find 10 quiet minutes to speak of the bad old days?” He smiled and scribbled back, passing the note again via Michnik, who must have wondered what was going on. “Let me come back to you,” it said. He called an assistant, whispered in his ear and, when the assistant returned and whispered his reply, he wrote this time: “It is all set. Sandwich lunch in my room”, with the room number. (Shall I spill the beans? I later heard through a Norwegian friend at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that “Mr Mandela unfortunately had to cancel a luncheon appointment with Mr X [a high-level Norwegian politician] due to an unforeseen emergency”. I felt a bit guilty, and also a bit proud! But, of course, I kept my mouth shut. If my Norwegian friend reads this today, I hope that he will understand and forgive.)

We spent about an hour and a half in Mandela’s hotel room, doing a sort of “post mortem” of ICRC prison visits, going over the conditions of detention on Robben Island, on what the ICRC could and could not do, on progress over the years, and on how long it sometimes took to get results, or on the differences between Prison Directors (Badenhorst versus Willems). Mandela underlined the importance of the ICRC’s obtaining early on the possibility for prisoners to study on Robben Island and stressed how positively this would affect South

19 See note 2, Sampson.
Africa's future, when many of those who had been imprisoned would become democratically elected leaders, a situation which, at the time, still looked far away and could definitely not yet be taken for granted. He mentioned the names of some of the other ICRC delegates who had visited him (Nicolas de Rougemont, Roger Santschy, Frank Schmidt, Dominique Dufour, Andreas Vischer) and I asked about some of the prisoners whom I remembered (Walter Sisulu, Ahmed Kathrada, Govan Mbeki, Toivo ya Toivo, Mac Maharaj, Steve Tshwete, Eddie Daniels, Johnson Mlambo, Dullah Omar, Sonny Venkatrathnam.) He started out by addressing me as "Dr Moreillon", as he had in Geneva in 1990 and as during my first visit to him in prison, and ended up by calling me "Jacques", as he had during my third visit. I followed suit, calling him first "Mr Mandela" and then "Nelson" ... but I did not dare address him as "Madiba" at that time. It would be pointless to recall here every detail of what we discussed for much of it is covered in earlier chapters, but there are some points which stood out in particular and are worth mentioning here.

The first is not only Mandela's formidable memory at the time, but the minute detail with which he recollected our visits, including my body language: how I had sat on his sisa mat with crossed legs, leaning against the wall, how I had offered him a cigarette (which he had declined!), the tone in which I had said certain things - and much the same about other ICRC delegates. As I marvelled at this, he gave me an answer which I have often quoted to young delegates learning their job as prison visitors: "You see, Jacques, when you are in prison and you know by heart every detail of your surroundings, be they material or human (the cell, the yard, the guards, your comrades), anything that comes from the outside world is examined, analysed and remembered in all its detail: it is as if you and other ICRC delegates were 'filmed' in our minds. We are like the dark room of a camera and the shutter suddenly opens for a brief moment and we literally register everything while that shutter is open: it prints on our minds as on a sensitive film. When you leave us, we pass the film again in our memory; we analyse it, we criticize it, we evaluate it, we appreciate it. It is the same thing with family visits. This is why our morale depended very much on whether one of these visits were a success or not, be it your visits or family visits."

I then recalled how he had argued in favour of "swapping" the right to family visits for the right to receive visits from friends, though without success with the authorities, at least in my time. His justification had been then that "sometimes we feel closer to our friends than to our blood family. For a political detainee, his friends are his family." Mandela confirmed my recollection: "Absolutely! That is why we insisted so much on obtaining visits from friends, or even exchanging the right to visits from family for the right to visits from friends ... and that is exactly why our requests were first refused, in spite of your efforts to change the authorities' policy on that subject."

Going back to the "mental filming" of ICRC delegates by prisoners, Mandela added: "After your visits, we would also compare notes and impressions between ourselves, in the same fashion as we would prepare ourselves for your visits, so as to present you with the same global picture, except on individual cases which were left to each one. We would not only run over the list of remarks made to your people, but also discuss our perceptions of individualities: the delegate's quality of listening, the thoroughness of notes taken, his personality, including his sense of humour or the impression of empathy he gave. For us, you were essential tools in order to reach our permanent prison objectives, but in a different way; so it was important that we should know these tools ... which, I hasten to add, were mostly of premium Swiss quality!"

Mandela's words reconfirmed one point that had struck all the ICRC delegates visiting Robben Island and which has been mentioned in most prisoners' accounts of their time in detention: how everything was discussed amongst the prisoners, including ICRC visits. This was an intensely democratic society, in which leaders were leaders by the will of the majority. Books written about life on Robben Island show that there were, indeed, tensions between ANC - as well as between ANC and non-ANC - leaders. But these tensions were just as
much the cause for more dialogue as the result of dialogue towards the building of consensus. And, once agreement was reached, by majority or by consensus, normally everyone – including those in the minority – would stick to the line chosen, at least towards the ICRC. We were never expressly told that this was the process adopted by the inmates to prepare themselves for our visits; but we were aware of it because we could judge the tree by its fruits: not only was one prisoner designated as “spokesman” (in my days, Mandela) but when we spoke to others (and we did to many) seldom would we hear divergent views on conditions of detention; and if we ever did, the prisoners themselves were keen to be given the possibility to settle these divergences amongst themselves, as was – for instance – the case between cooks and consumers mentioned in Chapter three.

During that Oslo conversation, I asked Mandela a direct question on a point that had been bothering me for years: “I remember you giving me the impression, on my third visit in 1975, that things were not going as fast as you had expected. Now that you are free but that your struggle is not yet over, can you tell me anything on that?” His answer was quite open and straightforward, with regard to the past but still cryptic as far as the future was concerned: “Oh yes! It all took much, much longer than we had thought. And, as you say, it is not over yet. But I am optimistic.” (I did not push this point, but I was inspired by Madiba’s optimism when, in Bangkok, in July 1993 – the year before “one man one vote” became a reality in South Africa – the World Scout Conference decided to hold its 1999 session in South Africa.)

But the main lesson of that Oslo meeting is one that I have tried, when given the opportunity, to pass on to younger ICRC delegates: “How you run your prison visit is as important as what you obtain through that same visit. It is not only the improvements in the conditions of detention that make their mark on the prisoners’ everyday reality; it is also the “film” of your visit that stays in their minds and memories.”

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There is another anecdote that comes to mind in relation to that Oslo meeting. One of the participants in that Conference on Hate was a close friend of mine, the late Byron Hove, a fiery lawyer, then President of the Zimbabwe Red Cross Society. Byron had also been imprisoned, though not for very long, and, at one point in the debate, he publicly blurted out to Mandela, using almost the same words I had used in Madiba’s cell when speaking of his censor in 1974: “I am impressed, Sir,” Hove said “by the absence of any hate in you. You have been in prison for 27 years and I only for a few months; during many of these years you were under much worse conditions than I and most of us political detainees in Zimbabwe ... But I confess that I have not been able to get the hate out of my heart! How do you do it?” Mandela gave him the same answer he had given me 16 years earlier, in cell number 5: “Hate only harms the hater. It is better to keep one’s energy for the struggle and save it by not hating!” In his address to the meeting, Mandela also declared: “We shall endlessly challenge the infamous seeds of hatred wherever these are found. This is the spirit in which we have come to Oslo. The spirit which has sustained us during the many lonely years of our imprisonment. The spirit which will form the basis of our new society.”

This was, in a way, answered – in what was perceived to be a great step forward at that time – by the South African Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs who spoke of his government desiring “real justice in our land” and wanting to “cast off the apartheid albatross”.

In the “Oslo Declaration” that concluded the Conference, “Hate” was defined as: “to refuse to accept another person as a human being, to diminish him, to limit your own horizon by narrowing his, to look at him – and also at yourself – not as a subject of pride but as an object of disdain and of fear".
25 March 1992

My next contact with Mandela was in March 1992, in the ANC office in Johannesburg. I was paying an official visit to President de Klerk and to other South African authorities as Secretary General of the WOSM, accompanied by the WOSM Regional Director for Africa, Kairathe Nyaga, a Kenyan Scout (since tragically killed in a plane crash on a scout mission), and by the then Chief Scout of South Africa, Garnet de la Hunt, a white businessman and Scout volunteer who had done much in previous years to keep South African Scouts from the practice of apartheid, managing, despite the country’s laws, to arrange for scouts of all races the possibility to travel, camp and generally be together.

In the South Africa of apartheid, this was an exceptional (sometimes even illegal) multiracial policy and I wanted to make sure that this practice of South African Scouts was known to the leadership of the ANC, for which I had obtained an appointment with Walter Sisulu (who – on July 7, 1991 – had been elected Vice-President of ANC, when Mandela was elected its President) at the ANC Headquarters in Johannesburg, having been told that, unfortunately, Mandela could not receive us.

The meeting with Sisulu – a remarkable figure, who was, as I have already mentioned, a mentor to Mandela – was very warm and friendly: we embraced first and exchanged a few words in the secretary's office about the “bad old days” and then went into his office to get down to the main purpose of our meeting: Scouting in South Africa.

As we walked out of Sisulu’s office, the secretary asked us to wait a minute, placed a brief phone call … and in walked Madiba! He was obviously in the middle of a meeting and had interrupted it briefly just to say hello. (What had happened, I found out later, was that the secretary – bless her soul! – observing the warm relationship between Sisulu and me, and catching our brief exchange about visits to Robben Island, had guessed at our common background and had taken the initiative to advise Mandela of our presence.)

The encounter was, under the circumstances, unavoidably brief, included an embrace and the by now customary and warm, “Oh, Jacques!” (This time it was “Jacques” and not “Dr Moreillon”!) “How nice to see you again!” But it was well worth it for the sake of my brother Scout Kairathe, who started floating six inches above ground the moment he shook his Great Man’s hand, bringing to my mind the porter of 19 years before in Cape Town! Kairathe also walked out of the office with that same dazed look on his face, staring at his hand – the hand that had touched Madiba’s! Mandela does this to people and, of course, especially – but certainly not only, as I was to see later – to Africans.

As we left, the secretary winked and said: “That was a treat, wasn’t it!”

10 May 1994

My next meeting with Nelson Mandela was just a brief greeting, when, as one of thousands, I congratulated him on becoming President of South Africa on his Inauguration Day, to which occasion I had been sent as Vice-President of the ICRC. But, however short the exchange and despite the importance of the event, the new President managed to give me a few words of appreciation for the work of the ICRC in South African prisons in preceding years.

Even apart from that detail, it was a truly memorable day! There was an intense sense of “history in the making” shared by the huge crowd of VIPs from all over the world and from South Africa as President Mandela was sworn in and the two national anthems of South Africa rang out, with many whites singing the “liberation song” of the continent, Nkosi Sikelel' i Afrika, and some blacks joining in with the “white man's song”, Die Stem.

Lost in the crowd under the warm sun, I remembered that my second visit to Robben Island had taken place just 20 years earlier, almost to the day, in May 1974! And I marvelled at the peaceful nature of the transition. Close to the new President, I spotted many faces of former
prison inmates and could well imagine what was going on in their hearts and minds. I thought, too, of Bram Fischer, and how much he would have enjoyed the moment. But I also thought of Kruger, Steyn and Willemsen (though without putting them in the same mental basket) and of some others who had been responsible, in days past, for the detention of a man who had become their new President. I was also happy to see former President de Klerk in a place of honour, a man without whom the miracle of a peaceful handover would not have been possible.

I met a number of former detainees on that occasion, all of them bathing in an atmosphere that conveyed a universal feeling that words were inadequate to convey: what each one had in his and her mind and heart, the difficulty of sharing with others the specificity of individual destinies thus suddenly mixed in the common destiny of this "rainbow nation" as Mandela put it so well. Each of them took the time and the trouble to say positive things about the ICRC's visits to them: Govan Mbeki; Jacob Zuma (then deputy Secretary General of the ANC and also a former "client" of the ICRC), and many others, such as (former exile, though not former prisoner) Joe Slovo (by then Minister of Lodgings and Reconstruction, co-comrade with Bram Fischer in the South African Communist Party), to whom I told the story of my last visit to dying Bram. Then there were other people to greet again, those whom I had met in less historic moments, such as former President de Klerk, Reverend Desmond Tutu (another enthusiastic supporter of the ICRC), or even Ambassador Jeremy B. Shearan, former Deputy Director-General of the South African Ministry of Foreign Affairs, still bitter towards the ICRC – and towards me in particular – for the eviction of South Africa from the International Red Cross Conference in Geneva in 1986 ... although the ICRC could hardly have been held responsible for that!

There were lighter moments as well. I remember a huge "breakfast", with about 180 Heads of State (or their representatives) standing around with coffee or orange juice and croissant in hand, vaguely going from one guest to the other, people who were normally so "hard to reach" and who, here, were literally lost in the crowd ... unless they "stood out" physically like President Abdou Diouf of Senegal (with whom I had a word, for we knew each other well from my days as Delegate-General for Africa), or politically, like Yasser Arafat and Fidel Castro, who were the only ones who caused a bit of a flurry among their illustrious "colleagues"! Others, such as Benazir Bhutto of Pakistan, President Daniel Arap Moi of Kenya, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, or France's First Lady Danielle Mitterrand, were wandering around in the crowd, looking for familiar faces. Arafat spoke favourably about what the ICRC was trying to do in Israeli prisons and I chatted (in French!) with his wife, whose mother, Raymunda Tawil, I had known in Nablus in 1969–70, when she was active in the Palestinian Women's Union and the Palestinian Red Crescent. With Fidel Castro, we spoke of André Pasquier, with whom he had met a number of times during the Grenada crisis, when Pasquier was Delegate General for Latin America, and whom Castro remembered well and fondly; I also took the opportunity to ask him whether the ICRC could do in Cuba what it had done in South Africa, namely "visit political detainees." "Why not?" he answered, smiling. "You are welcome!" But I am afraid there was no follow-up to that brief exchange!

That breakfast party was also a unique opportunity to relive old memories with some of the guests: President Robert Mugabe, a bit aloof but who remembered well my visits to him in Salisbury Remand Jail; Joshua Nkomo, friendly and exuberant, who reminded me of when we had crashed our small plane on our last visit to him in Gonaguzingwa in May 1974; José Eduardo dos Santos, President of Angola and former ICRC field officer, who kept his distance, unlike his companions, former ICRC "clients"; Joachim Chissano, President of Mozambique, with whom I had attended the seminar on the CDDH in Dar-es-Salaam in January 1974 which I mention in Chapter four; Kenneth Kaunda, whom I had met twice when he was President of Zambia; Julius Nyerere, former President of Tanzania; at greater length,
people such as the papal emissary Cardinal Roger Etchegaray and the Archbishop of Canterbury; and General Gowon, who was accompanying the then President of Nigeria, with whom I discussed the Nigerian civil war during which I had visited POWs on both sides, a subject on which he had precise questions to ask.

At that breakfast party, which lasted more than two hours, I was also privileged to have a conversation with a man standing alone in a corner, a cup of tea in his hand. The ICRC Head of Delegation, Vincent Nicod, a politically astute man, pointed him out to me: "You see that man alone over there? I am amazed that none of the big shots around has spotted him, for he is well worth investing in: in my view, he is most likely to be Mandela's successor." The man Vincent Nicod was pointing to was Thabo Mbeki, whom I had met only briefly in 1990 when he had accompanied Mandela to our meeting at the World Council of Churches in Geneva. I reintroduced myself to him and, of course, mentioned my visits to his father, telling him the "Oh Freedom!" anecdote. We thus spent ten quiet minutes, undisturbed by anyone, with the man who – as Nicod rightly predicted – would be elected as Mandela's successor five years later, and re-elected as President of South Africa in 2004. He also showed himself very appreciative of the work of the ICRC, although he himself had not been one of our "clients".

There were two amazing coincidences on that occasion: I met a close Scout friend of mine, the President of the Chilean Senate, Don Gabriel Valdés Subercaseaux, Vice-President of the Scout Parliamentary Union, and I was approached by a gentleman who addressed me in Spanish: "Are you not Dr Moreillon from the ICRC?" I confirmed it, upon which the man added: "I am the Vice-President of Bolivia. You visited me when I was a political detainee in La Paz in August 1971. I shall never forget you, and I always wanted to thank you, for you stopped torture there at the time." Moments like these are too precious not to share. (The gentleman in question was Dr Victor Hugo Cárdenas who, to my knowledge, was the first person of "Indian" origin to be elected Vice-President in any country of South America … and who thus knew something about "unwritten apartheid" as he told me during the brief re-encounter.)

10 February 1995

From 10 to 12 February 1995 (exactly five years after Mandela's release), Ahmed Kathrada (known to all his friends as "Kathy"), former librarian on Robben Island and later President Mandela's Chef de Cabinet, organized on the island, with the support of the non-governmental organization "Peace Visions", a "closed" reunion of all those political prisoners who had, at one time or another, been detained during the apartheid era (not only on Robben Island). This was to be at once a memorial event, a celebration of democracy in South Africa, a tribute to their sacrifice and, especially, an occasion to discuss the future of the island and its famous prison. In his foreword to the memorial booklet on the event, Ahmed Kathrada wrote, in his capacity as Secretary of the Committee Representing Ex-Political Prisoners and as Chairperson of the Presidential Committee on the Future of Robben Island, the following lines:

The Reunion on Robben Island was important for many reasons: Firstly, it gave formal recognition to former political prisoners for the role they played in helping bring about democracy in South Africa, and it allowed many people to re-establish links with each other again. It was heartwarming to see old comrades who had sometimes not seen each other since prison-days hugging excitedly. Secondly, the Reunion gave impetus to efforts to reward materially those who often sacrificed limb or living in the struggle against apartheid. For those of us now in government it was a shock to see the lines of deprivation and disability drawn on the bent figures of many comrades. I am very pleased to report that the conference resolution that government should act on this matter has been acted on via the promulgation of the Special Pensions Bill of December 1995, which makes provision for pensions "to persons who have made sacrifices, or who
served the public interest in the establishment of a democratic constitutional order. Finally, regarding the future of Robben Island, the ex-political prisoners made it clear that the historical integrity of the island needed to be protected in any future development, and that crass commercialisation should be rejected. The Committee on the Future of Robben Island will certainly take serious note of these feelings when it makes its recommendations to the President and the Cabinet.  

Mandela was to address the gathering and share a luncheon with all those present. The ICRC was one of the very few "outsiders" invited, and I was sent to represent the Committee as its Vice-President, together with the aforementioned Vincent Nicod, Head of Delegation in Pretoria.

The meeting was a joyful event, with beautiful weather and excellent food, and provided an occasion for more than 1,000 old comrades, most of whom had not seen each other since their respective releases (often at different times), to renew contact and exchange news. Some of the former inmates had become VIPs, while others had fallen into oblivion and were struggling hard to survive in difficult personal circumstances. Some had spent "only" two or three years in that prison and in relatively "comfortable" conditions (especially in the late 1980s), compared with others who had been locked in for almost 30 years, including the first terrible years in the 1960s. For all, it was an extremely moving occasion, not only for the chance to meet up with former fellow inmates, but especially to revisit their own cells and recall together many moments of despair, and some of joy.

I believe that President Mandela's address on that occasion should be quoted here in its entirety:

**Reunion Address – President Nelson Mandela (11 February 1995)**

Comrade Chairperson, Distinguished Guests, Comrades and Friends,

Yesterday we came to Robben Island for an emotional reunion of former political prisoners. The mixed feelings that this event evoked are testimony to the momentous changes that our country and our nation have undergone.

Few managed to suppress a tear. Many fond memories came gushing back.

But, above all, none of us could suppress the lump in our throats when we surveyed the array of distinguished luminaries who graced the occasion, all graduates of apartheid prisons: individuals holding the highest offices in the land; veterans such as Walter Sisulu, Govan Mbeki and Herman Toivo ja Toivo; ministers; parliamentarians; business-persons; sports personalities; leaders of civil society organisations; distinguished jurists and other intellectuals; officers of the army and our Intelligence organs; journalists – in brief, a cross-section of the leadership of our nation and beyond.

It was essential for us to have this reunion; to reflect on our many years of imprisonment and the common solidarity we forged. It was essential to recall the years of bitter struggles waged against the harsh and dehumanising conditions on Robben Island, Kroonstad and many other prisons across the land.

We needed to remind ourselves of the sacrifices of many who did not live to witness the birth of a new South Africa. We salute all of them: Elias Motsoaledi, Joe Gqabi, Zephania Mothopeng, William Khanyile, Jeff Masemola, Lambert Mbathe and many more; and we shall forever remain indebted to them.

Our reunion is also a celebration of the human spirit: its tenacity under the most trying moments; and its generosity in striving to discover and nurture the good in all human beings, including the warped tormentors.

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But, above all, it is a moment to celebrate the heroism of all the oppressed and
democratic forces who endured and challenged the powers-that-be in the bigger prison
that South Africa was. It is our opportunity to say to them and to the international
community: thank you for flinging wide the prison gates. For it is you and not any
individual or government who ensured that the changes that we have today in fact
happened.

We are here also to declare with confidence and conviction: never again, shall South
Africa imprison its citizens simply because they disagree with the government of the day.
The time for freedom, human rights, democracy and openness has come to pass.

It is a privilege to our generation that we were able to tread in the footsteps of a great
many heroes of past centuries. Autshumato of the Khoi, Islamic priests some of whose
remains lie buried on the Island, warrior-doctor Makhandla, Shaka's informant Msimbithi,
Chief Langelibalele of the Hlubi and others, blazed the trail of heroes who were
incarcerated on Robben Island for their opposition to colonial rule.

Yet it is also profoundly symbolic that Robben Island also acted as a leper colony and an
area of unwanted deployment for the likes of Jan Woutersz whose so-called "mixed
marriage" to a liberated slave was not approved of by the settler administration. For,
history has turned all these colonial concepts on their head, and the real proverbial
lepers of politics are the very masters who sought to keep the majority slaves.

It is a measure of the breath and depth of the forces involved in struggle that we have
among us members of different political organisations as well as people who might not
belong to any political organisation at all. It is a measure of the commitment of our
people to freedom that even those organisations which can in relative terms be
characterized as small, had and still have, within their ranks, committed activists who
were prepared to sacrifice their all for the liberation of the motherland. Such is the
tenacity of South Africans, a quality that should stand us in good stead in the period
ahead as we reconstruct and develop our country.

The question is often asked, how so many prisoners survived for so long the inhuman
and degrading conditions in apartheid's dungeons! Indeed, the primary thing that kept
our morale high was the knowledge and conviction that the cause of liberation was just
and would ultimately triumph. So – when we were daily stripped naked in the biting
winter cold; when we were tortured; when we were forced to break stones at the quarry –
ever for a moment did we allow this to break our spirits.

From the darkness of the prison cells, we knew there was light and a greater truth that no
prison walls could hold back: the quest for freedom by the millions in our country and
abroad.

We set about turning our prisons into schools for revolutionary fighters, giving cadre
development a top priority.

But we also need to be frank and acknowledge that, outside the prison gate, solidarity
and co-operation among former political prisoners has not been as it should be. Of
course, we are not a special breed that should bury its differences across the political
spectrum. Neither are we meant all to be friends simply because we spent time together
in prison.

Rather, there is a challenge that we identified before our release – a challenge that had
been enthusiastically taken up by international solidarity organisation before – which we
have not carried out to maximum effect. That is, to collectively attend to the social and
economic plight of former prisoners and detainees.
How inclusive and effective have the organs set up for this purpose been? Have we ensured that all former political prisoners, including those in far-flung villages, benefit from this exercise? These are questions that this conference cannot postpone.

At the formal governmental level, there are two forums that we need to utilise to ensure that those in need are catered for. Firstly, to contribute our own ideas to the criteria which will be used to put into effect the provision of the interim constitution for pensions to those who contributed to the democratisation of the country. Secondly, to ensure that those who suffered untold hardships benefit from the programmes that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission comes up with.

But we need to be cautious. In claiming all these rights, we should ensure that only those truly in need pursue this cause. We should do this conscious of the fact that we cannot ourselves behave in a manner that creates the perception that we seek to empty the public purse for personal gain; nor that we desire to be treated as a privileged class.

In the final analysis, the greatest token of redress that all of us can get is the successful reconstruction and development of our country. The energy we mustered to survive the difficult conditions of prison should be put to good use in the effort to build a better life for all our people.

It is not surprising that the eyes of our people and the world are focused on the events of the past two days.

On the one hand, in our own unique way, we do form part of the galaxy of resistance fighters throughout the world who stood firm during trying times. That past, that all of us dare not forget, even if we forgive, is a towering monument of lessons for the future.

On the other hand, our country and world want to know our collective view on the future of Robben Island. We cannot pretend that this is an easy question; neither does it lend itself to hasty answers. Many views have been put forward by a variety of interest groups. Even if we might not agree with them, we have no authority to question their integrity and good intentions.

In other words, we have to take full account of all the motivations, as systematically and as dispassionately as human nature can allow. But when the final decision is taken, account will have to be taken of the history of the island, its flora and fauna, its unique position as a place of both political and religious pilgrimage, as well as the country's strategic security interests.

One of the overriding considerations, in this respect, will be that our children and grandchildren should see in its nakedness that part of our history; they should bear witness to the years of struggle and sacrifice, and swear that such horrors would never be repeated. When the final decision is taken, due cognisance will have to be given to the feelings of those who hold the Island sacred; and those who would be offended by any modicum of vulgarisation that some of the proposals may invoke.

There are many rational possibilities for the future of the Island. Should it be a Youth Island with educational facilities; or a centre with relevant archives and a museum; or still a location for a South African Institute of peace and reconciliation? These and other suggestions are welcome. But we must ensure that we involve the broadest spectrum of South Africans in reaching at the final decision.

It is for this reason that I am in the process of setting up a Presidential Commission to examine this issue from all angles. The Commission will invite submissions from the public, including interested organisations and institutions. The recommendations will be submitted to the President for a final decision.
It will be crucial for the community of former political prisoners and the mass democratic movement as a whole to make well-researched and well-argued submissions to the Commission. The broad recommendations that will emerge from our deliberations here should definitely be pivotal in reaching the final decision.

We meet here today borne by the flood of our people’s desire to live a better life. Nothing else, but concern for the mass of our people, especially the very poor, should drive our individual and collective efforts. They brought down the prison walls because they were confident that we would meet their expectations. We dare not disappoint them.

There is one central challenge that faces all cadres of struggle – all those who have been in prison, in exile, in the underground and the mass democratic movement. That challenge is that we should strive today to be remembered not merely for our yesterday, but for our role in building a better tomorrow for all.

We must be at the core of the army of builders: to consolidate democracy; to ensure visible changes; to mobilise our people to take responsibility for their own lives; and to ensure that all citizens live a safe and secure life. We must be at the core of building relations of mutual co-operation with our neighbours and all peoples of the world.

This requires commitment and tenacity – certainly, even in greater measure than during those difficult moments behind the grey walls of apartheid prisons.

That is the clarion call of the moment!

Thank you!

It would take too long to list the former prisoners whom I saw again on that occasion. However, it is worth noting that – among those with whom I spoke personally – there were seven Ministers, six Parliamentarians, three Premiers of Provinces, plus Toivo ya Toivo then Minister of Mines and Energy of the Government of Namibia. All of them, without exception, had been able to study on Robben Island thanks in great part to the efforts of the ICRC, further proof of how absolutely vital it was for today’s South Africa that its future leaders had had that opportunity while they were political prisoners.

As for President Mandela, he was to go first around the open premises, all the way to the lime quarry, unavoidably accompanied, followed and preceded by a crowd and television cameras; he was then to enter the prison itself with only a select group and to walk to his cell. In order to avoid “fighting with the crowd”, I had a prior arrangement with Ahmed Kathrada that I would wait for the President inside the prison, just behind the main iron door, which I did.

Thus, when the prison door was unlocked and the President entered, I was there to welcome him. I don’t know if he had been forewarned of this or not by “Kathy”, for he looked a bit surprised, but when I let him in, saying: “This is not Colonel Willemse! But welcome to your former abode!” he smiled broadly and said, predictably: “Oh, Dr Moreillon! How nice to see you again!” I said: “I hope you won’t mind, Mr President, if we walk together the path which each of us walked separately in previous years.” “Not at all!” he replied. “I could not imagine better company.” And that’s what we did, with a small group behind us: down the main hall, to the left into B Section, down the steps into the yard, to the left again towards the single cells, to the right into the row of cells ... and to the right again into cell number 5. As we crossed the threshold, we said in unison: “They have moved my/your bed!” We both laughed and added together: “And repainted the walls!” The accompanying small group stayed in the narrow corridor as we stood together in the limited space where we had last parted 19 years before – with the added novelty of being filmed by TV cameras from the yard, through the bars of the window!
It may seem hard to believe, but I truly remember little of what we said when we found ourselves alone in that cell. I remember that there was a silence and I could not refrain from saying: "What a symbol!", to which President Mandela said simply: "Indeed." I added: "I have checked: it was April 1975 when we were last here together." He pondered awhile and replied: "April 1975. Then you were right: it must have been Willemse." I think - but I am not certain - that one of us said something about "things taking longer than foreseen" and the rest is unfortunately and unforgivably forgotten. I should have written down right away the details of that conversation; but I was too in awe of the power and importance of the place, of the man, of the historic symbolism of the moment, and my memory draws a blank on the rest of what must have been a five-minute stay. I do recall that, after a while, I felt that Mandela should be left alone with himself and quietly walked out. But he appeared less impressed and thoughtful than I was; he only stayed a few seconds more, joined the small crowd and, answering directly a question from the TV, explained that the gentleman standing next to him had been one of the ICRC delegates visiting Robben Island, that his first visit had been in 1973, in the very same cell, and added, addressing me: "As of that year, you started a process that brought about radical changes in our conditions of detention. We owe you so much and we shall always be grateful", which of course filled my heart with joy.

This is when - as I hinted at in Chapter two - I stayed behind with Walter Sisulu and Govan Mbeki, who said: "Let's go and see our cells." And it was in Sisulu's cell that I asked Mbeki if he remembered what we had sung together at the end of my first visit, in May 1973. "Of course I do," he answered: "Oh Freedom!" I was curious: "We only hummed the tune and did not sing the words. Did you know the words?" "Did I ever?" Mbeki shot back, and he started singing them, in his beautiful baritone voice: "Oh Freedom! Oh Freedom! Oh Freedom over me, over me! And before I'll be a slave, I'll be buried in my grave and go home to my Lord and be free!" Spontaneously, and before he got to the third "freedom", the three of us had locked our arms around each other's shoulders and were singing at the top of our voices, our heads bent towards the floor of Sisulu's cell.

As in 1973, when we got to the end, we stayed silent for a while, our arms and shoulders still locked. Mbeki broke both the lock and the silence, straightened up and said sarcastically: "Well! We didn't have to wait to 'go home to our Lord' in order to stop being slaves." And he led us back to the yard. There, I noticed that a wall had been built since my last visit, between the single cells and what was then the punishment cells. They explained to me that it was when this wall was built that Madiba's secret notes for his autobiography had been discovered by the prison authorities. A good thing that Mac Maharaj had had copies hidden in his photo album!

August 1999

In August 1999, the World Scout Conference took place in Durban, South Africa. Beforehand, I had written to and phoned Nelson Mandela to ask him if he would address the Conference. His answer was typical: "As you know Jacques, I have been a prisoner much of my life, not only as a political detainee, but almost as much as President of South Africa. Now that I am a truly free man, I have promised Graça [his wife, Graça Machel, whom I knew from working with her in a United Nations Commission on Children at War, which she chaired] that she would come first ... and I am afraid that, on your opening day, I shall be needed in our new home. She expects me to have an opinion on furniture and lighting, something for which cell number 5, as you may remember, hardly prepared me! But I shall check and get back to you." And get back he did, confirming that Graça was counting on him, but nevertheless giving me over the phone a message for me to relay to the Conference participants.

And so it was that I made the following statement to the Conference:
What I also want to share with you is that when Madiba became President of the Republic and I asked him to become the Patron of the Scouts of South Africa, he first ordered an enquiry. He did not need to know if Scouting in itself was a good thing. But he wanted to be quite sure how South African Scouts had behaved in the times of apartheid.

When the enquiry was concluded, on its merits he decided to accept to become Patron. In doing so, he told me: "They have not all been perfect. But, as an organisation and since the mid-eighties, they were already pretty much a model of what South Africa should be tomorrow!"

What better compliment can be paid to our host Association than to say that they were ahead of their time, in their own country, in the brotherhood of mankind. And by which respected voice! "A Scout is a brother to all Scouts". This is what they tried to be at a time when it was definitely not as obvious as today.

Two weeks ago I spoke with former President Mandela, inviting him to join us at our farewell party on Friday, stressing that it would be a wild African night and that we Scouts were inviting him and his wife Graça to come and dance with us, for we know he likes dancing. He did not say no, but he graciously reminded me that he had been hardly more free of his time as Head of State than on Robben Island! And he asked for our understanding if he would have, on that evening, other personal priorities. However, he stressed that, should he not be able to join us, he was wishing us all the best and expressed his pride and happiness that the 35th World Scout Conference should take place in South Africa. I am therefore transmitting to you faithfully his message, thus closing a personal circle which was opened for me in 1973.

11 July 2003

In July 2003, the British Red Cross invited me to present its Humanity Award to Nelson Mandela, which involved an exchange of speeches.

Mandela gave a powerful address, which I reproduce here in its entirety, not only because of what he says in it about the Red Cross, the ICRC and humanitarian law, but also because of what he says on AIDS in Africa, which is his battle of today, which all of us should support, something I have very much done as Secretary General of World Scouting.

It is a great honour to have been invited to deliver this Red Cross Humanity Lecture.

Not only does the Red Cross hold a special place in our collective sense of ourselves as a globally caring community; to me personally, and those who shared the experience of being political prisoners, the Red Cross was a beacon of humanity within the dark inhumane world of political imprisonment.

The improvements in the conditions of our imprisonment at Robben Island were to a large measure due to the pressure that the mere presence of the Red Cross brought to bear on our jailer-regime. It says much for the moral weight of the Red Cross that even the apartheid regime, which was in so many other respects indifferent to world opinion, found itself cowed and pressurised by this organisation.

It teaches a lesson that those who conduct themselves with morality, integrity and consistency need not fear the forces of inhumanity and cruelty; evil ultimately lives in fear of and under threat from the uncompromising commitment to justice, fairness and human compassion.

The history of the world, also in the last two centuries, has unfortunately been a story of too many wars with all the attendant cruelty of humankind against humankind. The twenty-first century, which so many hoped would at last be the century of the triumph of world peace and global caring, has not started too promisingly. Conflicts still plague
many areas on the globe, and we have seen the emergence of unilateral superpower military interventions.

In the midst of bloodshed and war, of animosity and pain, hatred and conflict, the Red Cross has carried the flag of the belief in our common humanity; and lived out that belief in action in conditions and circumstances where the opposite sentiment dominated.

The Geneva Conventions and its successor conventions, grown out of the International Red Cross, continue to remind us most forcefully of our common obligation to care for each other even, and particularly, in conditions that foster behaviour to the contrary. These conventions are a call to caring multilateralism. They tell us, more powerfully than all the political treaties, of the strength of multilateralism and international consensus.

We have found ourselves compelled to speak out strongly in recent months against the rise of unilateralism in world affairs. We publicly and in private expressed our sharp differences on this matter with Prime Minister Blair and President Bush, both young leaders whom we otherwise hold in high regard.

The differences we have on this matter, particularly as manifested in the war against Iraq, are not simply issues of political difference. I am a retired old man, without any office or political influence or any desire to such office or influence. I have lived through almost the entire twentieth century, in a country and continent where we had to devote almost all of that life to struggling against a social and political legacy left by events of the nineteenth century. To see young political leaders of the developed world in the twenty-first century act in ways that undermine some of the noblest attempts of humanity to deal with those historical legacies, pains me greatly and makes me worry immensely about our future.

That is the nature of my difference with them and my criticism against them. In a world still so grossly unequal, both in material terms and in terms of power and influence, our hope for orderly co-existence lies in global co-operation and an uncompromising multilateral approach to dealing with our problems, conflicts, differences and challenges.

For almost one and a half centuries the International Red Cross has stood as such an organ of international and multilateral co-operation. To be here with you is a proud affirmation of the values of global co-operation and respect for the basic human rights of all, irrespective of all social or national differences. We salute you and join with you in this quest for human solidarity and caring.

When one speaks of the great role the International Red Cross has played one tends to think particularly of its noble part during times of war.

There is a new war of global dimensions underway that we cannot neglect mentioning in this context. We are referring to the war against HIV/AIDS.

AIDS represents a tragedy of unprecedented proportions unfolding particularly in Africa, but with incidence and effect across the globe. AIDS today in Africa is claiming more lives than the sum total of all wars, famines and floods, and the ravages of such deadly diseases as malaria. It is devastating families and communities; overwhelming and depleting health care services; and robbing schools of both students and teachers.

Business has suffered losses of personnel, productivity and profits; economic growth is being undermined and scarce development resources have to be diverted to deal with the consequences of the pandemic.

HIV/AIDS is having a devastating impact on families, communities, societies and economies. Decades have been chopped from life expectancy and young child mortality is expected to more than double in the most severely affected countries of Africa. AIDS is
clearly a disaster, effectively wiping out the development gains of the past decades and sabotaging the future.

It is no less than a war, a world war that affects all of us ultimately. The developing world is, as in so many other cases, suffering the worst while having the least resources to deal with the threat. Once more, an organisation like the International Red Cross and its national chapters can play a huge role in mobilising world opinion and resources to help combat this terrible and threatening scourge.

We are in this modern globalised world each the keeper of our brother and sister. We have too often failed that moral calling. The International Red Cross had been both our conscience and the source of redeeming us in this regard.

I thank you for that in my personal capacity and from my personal experience together with my fellow political prisoners. I am certain that a world wishing for the better of our human nature to triumph and prevail, thanks you as much.

May you see this third century in which you operate, truly becoming the one in which all human beings across the globe will at last enjoy a better life.

I thank you.

I responded briefly, before presenting him with the Award, regaling the audience with some of the anecdotes told within these pages.

As I walked down the central aisle of the large and crowded hall, walking a few steps behind Madiba, I could see what in my mind I call the "Mandela effect": as he advanced, first towards and then past people, their faces were literally "transfigured" as if illuminated from within. It was truly impressive to watch the effect he had on individuals, some reaching out to touch him, others just basking in the simple joy of his proximity. One could feel that this was to be a very important moment in their lives, that they would go home and tell their folks: "I have seen Mandela! I was that close to him! I touched his hand." I thought again of the hotel porter in Cape Town in 1973 and of my Scout brother Kiraithethe in the ANC office in 1992 and I wished that I could be a film-maker and have the talent to produce a movie, in which the "red thread" would be Madiba's hand, expressing fully the unique charisma of this exceptional personality who has such a natural ability to inspire awe in anyone who comes close to him.

23 April 2004

My latest – and possibly last – meeting with Madiba was in Houghton, Johannesburg, in his office at the Mandela Foundation. The "Ousseimi Foundation", of which I am a member of the board, had awarded him its first "Ousseimi Prize for Tolerance", and Khaled Ousseimi, its Founder, had asked his daughter Maria – also a member of the board – and me to present Mandela with the cheque, as well as with the diploma and the statuette that go with the prize. I was accompanied by my wife, whose birthday it happened to be that day, and, in Chapter six, I have already told the story of how Mandela greeted her. With us were the Chief Scout of South Africa, Nkwekwe Nkomo (himself a former – though later – prisoner and "client" of the ICRC on Robben Island and successor to Garnet de la Hunt) and Kinuthia Murugu (Director for Africa in World Scouting and successor to the late Kiraithethe Nyaga), who were to bestow upon Mandela the highest African Scout Award, the African Elephant, which had actually been awarded to him when he was President of South Africa, but which he had never had the time to collect.

The meeting had been very difficult to arrange, possibly for administrative reasons, but nothing in Mandela's attitude showed that he had been aware of this. To the contrary, he was particularly warm in his by now customary: "Oh, Jacques! How nice to see you again!"

The meeting – which was followed by pictures taken in another room – lasted for about an hour and took place in three parts:
Maria Ousseimi first presented him with the cheque for his Foundation which accompanied the "Ousseimi Prize for Tolerance", with a few words:

Dear Mr Mandela ... or, if I may, "Dear Madiba" as I see that is how your friends call you. Before presenting you with this Award for Tolerance under the form of a cheque for your Foundation and of this statuette, I hope that you will allow me to say a few words about the Ousseimi Foundation and its Founder, my father Khaled Ousseimi. The Ousseimi Foundation was set up 12 years ago by my father. He had then decided to endow the foundation with a substantial part of his personal fortune, with the main aim of promoting higher education by supporting those who would not otherwise have access to it. With time, the Foundation enlarged its scope of action and began financing various projects of a cultural and developmental nature as well as relief efforts in time of crisis, with a special focus on women and children.

Recently, my father and the Foundation Board decided to create an Award that would be given to individuals who had striven to promote tolerance through their life's work.

When he brought his idea to the board, of which Mr Moreillon and myself are members, the choice of your name as first recipient of the Ousseimi Award for Tolerance was spontaneous and unanimous. Mr Mandela, you have, through your life's work and permanent struggle, shown such power of forgiveness, acceptance and tolerance that the lessons you teach resonate throughout the world. You embody those universal qualities that transcend boundaries, race, colour and religion. You have given the world an example that is unique and is an inspiration to all those who want to believe in better days.

Dear Mr Mandela it is an honour for me to present to you, on behalf of my father and of the members of the board, the first Ousseimi Award for Tolerance.

Then Nkwekwe Nkomo and Kinuthia Murugu spoke to Mandela about Scouting in Africa and in South Africa, and decorated him with the "Africa Elephant" Scout Award, with the following citation: "His Excellency retired President Nelson Mandela was born and grew up in the province of Transkei in rural South Africa. From his first day at school he valued education and recognised it the vehicle for the advancement of the people of Africa. Despite interruptions to his education caused by his standing up for his principles whilst at Fort Hare University, Dr. Mandela was able to continue his studies through other means and over many years, at times under the very difficult conditions of prison life. Scouting, which is a form of non-formal education, understands and recognises this commitment.

Dr. Mandela has had an enduring belief in the youth and has always promoted the development of young people. In 1943, he and a group of other visionary freedom fighters launched the ANC Youth League as a way of bringing youthful dynamism to the freedom struggle. The empowerment and involvement of young people is central to Scouting and is now the number one strategic priority of the World Organisation of the Scout Movement.

But more than anything else, Dr. Mandela will always be best known and remembered for his epic struggle against apartheid and his central role in creating a new South Africa where people of all races can live as equals. Despite great hardships, harassment and being imprisoned for 27 years, he remained steadfast and true to his believes. His determination, perseverance, courage and self-sacrifice for the good of other people are qualities that all scouts should emulate as they endeavour to live in accordance with the scout Law and Promise.

In 1977, the South Africa Scout Association took the courageous and unprecedented step of defying a cruel and unjust system and opened its doors to all young South Africans in a single united Association. Upon becoming President of South Africa in 1994, Dr. Mandela recognised this pioneering role of scouting in integrating South African society when he accepted to become the Association's Patron.
Under his patronage, the scout movement has made tremendous progress and is today the largest youth organisation in the country with over 500,000 members spread across South Africa. In 1999, the Scout Association played host to the world when the 35th World Scout Conference was held in Durban. Today, South African scouting is at the forefront of the campaign against HIV/AIDS, empowering young people to say no to unsafe sex and drugs whilst equipping them with values and life skills that will make them self-reliant, supportive, responsible and committed persons able and willing to contribute to the building of a dynamic and democratic South African nation.

In recognition of his commitment to the dignity and freedom of all people, his support for the development of young people and their education, and his contribution to the growth of Scouting in South Africa and beyond, Dr. Nelson Mandela was awarded the AFRICA ELEPHANT AWARD, the highest and only Award given by the Africa Scout Committee.

This led Madiba to insist on the importance of building a value system among the youth of Africa. He confirmed that he had been "honoured" to become "Patron" of the Scout of South Africa for the movement "built perseverance into young people." He then gave the example of a young woman, about whom he had read, who had to have her leg amputated because of cancer and added: "Rather than sit and moan, she is now walking right across the USA. This is the kind of values that scouting gives to young people."

We then went into recollections of the past and I have recounted at the end of Chapter 6 how, on that meeting in April 2004, I had told him about my last visit to dying Bram Fisher and given Mandela the ICRC badge that Bram had held to his heart.

Concerned about "telling the full story" I spoke about my personal wish that the South African authorities should grant researchers access to ICRC reports on our visits to prisons, so that the complete picture could be known to historians. He said that, in his opinion, it should be feasible and that it was, indeed, desirable, pointing out that someone like Ahmed Kathrada was the ideal person to push this project forward. And then he added with a chuckle: "I would also recommend it, but you know, I am nobody any longer. Just a has-been." As we laughed at this, he added: "Believe me! The only one who thinks I am still President is ..." and there he named a former very important, but now elderly, white South African statesman who had fought Mandela as long as he could, and went on: "He keeps calling me, telling me ..." and here he switched to Afrikaans "this or that is unacceptable! Unacceptable!" He switched back to English: "I have given up telling him that I am no longer President of South Africa. I just take his complaint, pass it on to the competent authorities and, when they have solved it, I take the credit for it! After all, he is the only one who still thinks that I have influence!" And then he went on to say: "But I tell my people: treat these fellows well, for always remember: we shall be treated as we treat them." There was so much humour, forgiveness and wisdom in all this. So much strength and modesty too. But also so much self-assurance. I thought: "This is also the difference between a real statesman and a mere politician."

Commenting on his Afrikaans and remembering the hours he had spent in prison working on it, I said that at least one of the advantages of Robben Island was that he could improve his Afrikaans there ... to which he readily agreed.

He then added that it was very important that the new generations in and of South Africa should be told about how things were in the times of apartheid and that the story of Robben Island was a key part of that collective memory. To illustrate his point, he told us that he had recently been talking to South African children and one six-year-old girl had asked him how long he had been in jail. When he answered "27 years", she shot back: "27 years! You must not be very clever!" And, with a hearty laugh, he added: "After all, she may be right!"

Learning that Scouts were fighting against AIDS throughout Africa, he spoke at length of that terrible scourge, giving examples of infected women who had shown tremendous courage in the face of adversity. One could feel that this was truly his new crusade, the battle to which he was going to devote the years still ahead of him.
As we parted after the photo opportunity, Nelson Mandela, visibly aware that this could be our last meeting, limped a few steps towards us and called me back. Looking straight into my eyes, he said: "Jacques! Always remember how important those visits were to us!"

My heart twisted: it sounded so much like final parting words. And I felt humbled and grateful to have been one of the ICRC delegates who were given the chance to make a small contribution to the destiny of one of the greatest men of the 20th century and, through him and others, of a very unique country.