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PRESIDENT LECH WALES AND PRESIDENT NELSON MANDELA: 2014 RECIPIENTS

Ariel Guggisberg[†]

The activist and former Polish President Lech Walesa and civil rights activist and former South African President Nelson Mandela were chosen by the Freedom Center to receive the 2014 International Freedom Conductors Award. These two revolutionaries undoubtedly meet the criteria of “reflect[ing] the spirit and courageous actions of conductors on the historic Underground Railroad.”¹ Both recipients of the award have spearheaded efforts to effect positive social change and dedicated much of their lives to the fight for freedom, and “exemplify the values of freedom and human rights worldwide.”²

I. FORMER PRESIDENT LECH WALES A

President Walesa helped to “form and lead communist Poland’s first independent trade union, Solidarity.”³ He became an active antigovernment union activist in 1976 when protests erupted against the government, losing his job as an electrician in the process. In 1980, Walesa gained respect when he joined protests against an increase in food prices at the Lenin shipyards, resulting in a rise through the ranks of the revolution against communism.⁴ He confirmed the right to “organize freely and independently” by entering an agreement with the Polish government, which influenced the formation of many unions across Poland (later becoming Solidarity). President Walesa attempted to avoid Soviet military

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¹ See *What We’re Doing*, <http://freedomcenter.org/special-events/ifca>.

² See Mark Curnutte, *Walesa and Mandela honored by Freedom Center*, Cincinnati.com, August, 22, 2014,

<http://www.cincinnati.com/story/news/2014/08/21/walesa-mandela-honored-freedom-center/14422717/>.

³ See *Encyclopedia Britannica*, July 24, 2014,

<http://www.britannica.com/biography/Lech-Walesa>.

⁴ *Id.*

intervention of his activism, but failed and was arrested due to his leadership in Solidarity.

President Walesa was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1983, against the Polish government's approval, so his wife was forced to accept the award for him. In 1988, Solidarity gained legal status again, due to an outbreak of labor protests that compelled the government to negotiate with the union. Solidarity won an "overwhelming majority" of Parliament seats in a free election in 1989. He ran for President in 1990 and won, serving until 1995. During the course of his leadership, he "helped guide Poland through its first free parliamentary elections [in 1991] and watched as successive ministries converted Poland's state-run economy into a free-market system."⁵

II. FORMER PRESIDENT NELSON MANDELA

Nelson Mandela is widely known as a prominent force in ending the apartheid leadership in South Africa. After earning an education and leaving his home tribe, Mandela aided in forming the African National Congress Youth League to effect change.⁶ He led several peaceful protests, but after being acquitted in the Treason Trial, ultimately resorted to violence as a means to end the white minority rule. He left South Africa in an effort to gain support for his plans to overthrow the government. After being caught, he was sentenced to prison, and subsequently again faced judgment in the Rivonia Trial. This is where Mandela gave his renowned "Speech from the Dock," on April 20, 1964 when faced with potential life imprisonment. He said, "I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ See Nelson Mandela Biography, A&E Television Networks, October 13, 2015, <http://www.biography.com/people/nelson-mandela-9397017#retirement-and-later-career>.

die.”⁷ He was sentenced to life in prison. Not to be deterred by tuberculosis or a lengthy prison term, Mandela gained a reputation as an influential leader against the apartheid, and entered into negotiations to officially end the white minority rule after being released from prison in 1991.⁸

In 1993, Mandela was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his dedication to justice. He was elected as President of South Africa from 1994 to 1999, effecting a strong transition from the apartheid rule to a more equal and just system.⁹ Mandela passed away on December 5, 2013 at the age of 95.¹⁰

⁷ See Biography of Nelson Mandela, Nelson Mandela Foundation, <https://www.nelsonmandela.org/content/page/biography>.

⁸ Supra note 6.

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ *Id.*

