Assata Shakur was born in New York City. Her parents would become divorced when she was young and she would split time between being with her mother in New York City and her grandparents in Wilmington, North Carolina. Through her grandparents, she was taught how to maneuver in America during segregation and Jim Crow. Assata enjoyed living in the south with her grandparents and spent majority of her elementary years there, but would return to New York to live with her mother during her junior high school years. Assata and her mother’s relationship was not always the best, and Assata would run away from home numerous times during her teenage years. Eventually, Assata would move in with her Aunt, Evelyn Williams, after running away and being discovered by a family friend. While living with her aunt, Assata started to visit museums and art galleries. Her aunt also fed her addiction for learning, as she had an excellent library that Assata would take advantage of daily after school. Despite her thirst for knowledge and love of history, Assata was growing weary of the school system and racism within it. At the age of 17, she decided to drop out of school and started living on her own and got a job. She would continue learning and eventually earn her GED before enrolling into the Manhattan Community College.

Assata’s main purpose for deciding to enroll into Manhattan Community College was simply to gain a better job, but roughly two weeks after starting classes she discovered the Golden Drum Society on campus. The group was the black organization on campus for African American students that helped spark Assata’s interest in her history and the civil rights movement. As she continued to learn about black history, Assata became more aware of how much black people had been struggling and treated unjustly well before ever coming to America. She was also able to see that there was also a long history of intellectual strength and examples of organization built by blacks, as opposed to the traditional stories that had been taught to her through grade school. This awakening inspired Assata to become more active and form a coalition on campus as well as run for student council. She also started to become more active in participating in demonstrations throughout the city for numerous causes such as housing strikes, construction workers fair compensation, welfare rallies, and anti-war movements. During this period, Assata met her husband who was engulfed in the Black Liberation struggle as well. The two would become married after Assata graduated from Manhattan Community College, but the marriage would only last for a year as the two learned that they were better off as friends. While working alongside others during anti-war movements around the city, Assata started to realize that the oppression that blacks faced was not limited to America. She became more aware of how oppression was being exported to other countries like Vietnam, many countries throughout Africa, and other third world countries. Assata began looking for organizations outside of campus that aligned with her interests and growing beliefs that she would be able to be apart of for the long-term. Following her separation from her husband, Assata decided to go to California for a change of scenery for a while. While in California, she spent time in Oakland and was able to see the impact of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense in person. After taking the time to observe numerous organizations, Assata decided to join the party.

To receive true equality in America, Assata felt that the entire American government system needed be changed and a revolution needed to occur. She felt that true freedom could not be reached while fighting for reform of a system that had been built on a foundation of racism, oppression, capitalism, and imperialism. These beliefs aligned with those of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense but the party’s style and arrogance of some of its leaders was a bit of a contrast to Shakur’s quiet and peaceful nature. Despite the differences in style, Assata decided to join the party once she returned to New York from her trip to California. The death of Jonathan Jackson, the Soledad Brothers case, and the chase for Angela Davis really set a fire under Assata. The heroic efforts of these brothers and sisters caused for Assata to question her activity within the Liberation struggle and vow to do more for the movement. She joined the BPP Harlem chapter and was assigned to the medical cadre. They were responsible for the health care of the Panthers and would make medical and dental appointments for members while teaching basic first aid practices for emergencies. Assata’s differences with the party were evident early on, as she was expelled at the hands of Robert Bey after her first day working with the medical cadre. She would eventually be reinstated but Bey was a symbolism of the arrogance that she despised amongst some of the Party’s leaders. Assata would go on to help with the breakfast program at the Harlem chapter and enjoyed it a great deal outside of the early mornings. Eventually, she would begin to work closely with Zayd Shakur in dealing with white support groups who were involved in raising the bail money for the Panther 21 members that were in jail. The Panther 21 was a group of Panther leaders for the New York chapters who had been charged with conspiracy to blow up the flowers in the Botanical Garden and held on $100,000 bail. The charges were obviously bogus but was part of the governments way to cripple the Panthers. The Panther 21 were some of the most politically educated members of the Black Panther Party. Political education was not one of the strong suits of majority of the members of the party and the Political Education program left much to be desired in Assata’s opinion. This made the work that Zayd and her were doing extremely important, as the party needed it brightest thinkers free. Assata and Zayd would establish a solid friendship due to Zayd’s humble and respectful nature. During her time working closely with Zayd, is also when surveillance from the FBI began to increase towards Assata. She started to notice random officers tailing her at the dry cleaners or outside her apartment. She dealt with her phone being tapped and constantly ringing despite not paying the bill for months. One day, while headed home, a friend stopped her in passing and her warned her to not to go home due to her apartment building being surrounded by cops. Assata was wanted for questioning in regards to the whereabouts of Panther 21 members and alleged crimes committed by her and associates. She immediately thought about the Panther 21 and other members who had been incarcerated unjustly and decided it was time to go underground until she could figure out what was exactly going on.

On May 19, 1971, Malcom X’s birthday, two cops were shot outside while guarding the home of Manhattan District Attorney, Frank Hogan. At the time, Assata was living with a friend and adjusting to life underground. She had a job working with the railroad stations and stayed relatively lowkey. One morning, Assata’s friend went to retrieve the daily paper and found quite the surprise on the cover. Assata was wanted for questioning in relation to the shooting outside of the District Attorney’s home. She was completely shocked, and her mind was racing with no idea what to do next. She decided to go through her list of contacts and figure out who she could call on for help. Over the next couple of years, Assata would live with numerous friends and associates who were forced underground like her due to their political beliefs and the FBI’s commitment to stopping all Black Liberation groups. On May 2, 1973, Assata, along with Zayd and Sundiata Acoli, was pulled over by the New Jersey State police. During the stop, Assata was shot twice and charged with the murder of a police officer. Also, Zayd was killed during the stop, another officer was shot but was in good condition, and eventually Sundiata would be arrested and charged with the murder of the slain officer as well. She would remain in prison until 1979.

While Assata was incarcerated, she had to deal with inhuman treatment from police, doctors, and correction officers. As a result of the ‘traffic stop’ on the New Jersey turnpike, Assata was shot twice: once in the arm and once in the back. Her arm needed the care of doctor, but she was denied proper care for an extended upon incarceration while having endure random acts of violence from guards and police. In addition to the everyday brutality that she was dealing with, it became obvious to Assata that the government was going to do their best to railroad her in the name of the law. While she was living underground prior to her arrest, Assata had been charged and wanted for several crimes. The FBI’s COINTELPRO program had been creating false cases on prominent leaders of the Black liberation movement throughout the late 60’s and early 70’s. Assata would be charged with six additional crimes outside of the New Jersey turnpike shooting. She would eventually be acquitted in three of the cases while the other three were dismissed. While on trial for the three cases in which she was acquitted, Assata was shuttled from prison to prison and sometimes found herself as the only woman in a man prison. Court dates came randomly, in hopes of not giving her defense enough time to properly fight her cases. The jury members in her cases were often all white and would admit their bias bluntly during the jury selection process but still be permitted to serve during the trials. During one trial a judge had to be removed from the case due to his own bias. In the midst of the hell that Assata was experiencing, she became pregnant by Kamau Sadiki who was charged in a Bronx bank robbery case alongside Assata. Her pregnancy would allow for her trial for the New Jersey shooting to be postponed. While waiting for the birth of her child, Assata was held in solitary confinement at the Middlesex County Jail for men from February 1964 until May 1964. Her lawyers filed a lawsuit due to the abuse, but Assata was extradited to the State of New York the day before the hearing which made the lawsuit moot. She would be held at Rikers Island until the birth of her child. The treatment at Rikers was similar to the treatment at the Middlesex County Jail with the exception being that there were other women within the prison. The special pregnancy diet that she received consisted of powdered milk, juice, and a hard-boiled egg. Despite the lack of proper care, Assata would go on to give birth to her daughter, Kakuya Amala Olugbala Shakur, on September 11, 1974.

Following the birth of her daughter, Assata would remain in prison while awaiting trial for the New Jersey turnpike shooting, an alleged kidnapping of a drug dealer, and another alleged bank robbery case. First, she would stand trial for the kidnapping case along with Rema Olugbala and Ronald Myers. This case was another example of the false cases the FBI was charging Black Liberation leaders with all across the country in hopes of killing the movement. Assata and her codefendants were charged with kidnapping a drug dealer and drugging him while holding him ransom inside a bar. The prosecution attempted to use witnesses, who under cross examination, who were colluding with the FBI to convict Assata. During the trial, it was proven by a medical examiner that the ‘drug dealer’ had never been drugged and only swallowed a couple of aspirins. The most damaging blow was when Assata’s defense was able to call upon the true owner of the bar, the scene of the crime. The owner testified that the bar had been closed for an entire year prior to the alleged incident and was still closed at the time of the incident. It was obvious that the case had no legs and Assata and Ronald Myers were acquitted on December 8, 1975. Unfortunately, during the trial Rema Olugbala attempted to escape from prison and passed away in the process. Fifteen days after her acquittal on the kidnapping case, Assata was moved from Rikers Island to Manhattan Correctional Center to await trial for the bank robbery case. The back to back cases was extremely unfair to Assata and her defense. Preparing for the cases was extremely difficult due to the lack of proper time to acquire the proper investigators and forensic specialist. The government was trying their best to make it impossible for Assata and her defense to prepare for the New Jersey turnpike shooting by keeping them in court on false cases created by the FBI. Regardless, in the coming months, Assata would stand trial for the second bank robbery case. Similar to the kidnapping case, the prosecution’s case was poor and fell apart as soon as witnesses started to take the stand. The biggest hit to the prosecution’s case was when the manager of the bank testified that the woman who was involved in the robbery was a different height and weight than Assata. She would be acquitted for the bank robbery case on January 16, 1976 and return to Rikers Island and be put in solitary confinement until she stood trial for the New Jersey turnpike shooting. Sundiata Acoli had already been found guilty in the New Jersey turnpike shooting. Assata had been in prison for three years and endured the brutal treatment and constant bogus court cases but her toughest fight still remained. During the bank robbery, Assata was forced to enlist a new lawyer by the name of Stanly Cohen. Cohen did such a great job on the bank robbery case that Assata wanted him and her aunt, Evelyn, to work on the turnpike shooting case together. The group knew that they would need experts to help prove Assata’s innocence, but it was extremely difficult to obtain any because majority of the experts that were needed worked for the police. Cohen was able to secure an investigator and was making progress on finding a forensics expert. He would visit Assata to share the good news with her, and a few days later he mysteriously was found dead in his home. After Cohen’s death, all of the legal papers for the case were missing. The New York City police had the papers and claimed they confiscated them as evidence. Eventually, the papers would be returned but the notes on the investigator and forensic expert were missing along with the trial strategy that the group was mapping out for Assata’s defense. To replace Cohen, Assata hired William Kunstler to join her defense team. After admitting Kunstler to the case, the judge rescinded a previous order that allowed for Assata to utilized state-paid experts and investigators. In the months leading up to the trial, close to all of the defense team’s motions were denied, Assata had been denied her right to defend herself in court and act as co-counsel, a change of venue request had been denied, a motion to review the surviving officer’s police record was denied, a motion to introduce evidence that Assata had been victimized by the FBI’s COINTELPRO program was denied, and the judge even attempted to have members of the defense disbarred. To top it all off, the jury consisted of all white members. Two of the jury members were friends of New Jersey State troopers, one was a girlfriend of a state trooper, and two were nephews of Jersey state troopers. Regardless of the great deal of adversity they were facing, the defense felt that they still had a small shot at winning the case. The defense was able to prove by medical testimony that Assata had been shot in the back with her hands raised, that the officer had fired the first shot, and that Assata’s hand was paralyzed after being shot and unable to shoot the officer as accused. The trial began on January 17, 1977 and from the beginning it was obvious that the judge as going to make the defense’s job as difficult as possible similar to the pretrial and jury selections. The judge would not permit Assata’s defense to read Assata’s opening statement to the jury. Shakur’s defense team’s headquarters had been broken into and had important papers stolen as a result. The defense team submitted a motion for the crime to be investigated but the judge denied the motion and deemed it as “frivolous”. Eventually, a ruling would be handed out making Assata guilty in the New Jersey turnpike shooting and she would be sentenced to life in prison.

For the next two years, Assata remained in prison away from her family and loved ones for a crime that she did not commit. Her imprisonment obviously took a great toll on her relationship with her daughter. Assata’s mother came to visit her one day along with her daughter. Throughout the visit her daughter was very cold towards her and she realized the lack of time spent together was making her daughter resent her. This interaction caused for Assata to decide that she had to escape and she started to plan for exactly that. In 1979, Assata was rescued from prison and lived underground for 5 years before escaping to Cuba. She would eventually be reunited with her mother, aunt, and daughter in Cuba where she still currently lives under political asylum. Years after her escaped from prison and living peacefully in Cuba, Assata still remains a target for the United States government. She has been listed on the FBI’s most-wanted listed and has a bounty of $2,000,000 dollars for her capture. It’s safe to say that the COINTELPRO program is still very much in use today. Kamau Sadiki, the father of her daughter, was randomly charged with the murder of a police officer in Atlanta, Ga in 2002 despite the Fulton County D.A. refusing to try him 30 years ago due to lack of credible evidence. Assata Shakur’s story is a testament to life in Amerika for freedom fighters. The government will do whatever they can, often illegally, to keep oppressed people from receiving true equality. The same issues that the Panthers and the BLA were fighting for are still relevant today and often caught on video and shared with the world to see. Regardless, the result is the same, cops are still killing black people across Amerika with no consequence. Racist judges, district attorneys, and lawmakers are still railroading blacks into the prison system daily. As the struggle for true liberation continues, the one difference in times may be that we are more aware of our history and the strength of those that came before us and fought the same fight. Due to this, we are stronger than ever, and we can thank Assata Shakur and a host of other political for that. We CAN’T allow their courage and fight to go in vain.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZCuj2pvFPY4>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kpbZ7cuwEMg&feature=emb_title>

<https://www.amazon.com/Assata-Autobiography-Shakur/dp/1556520743/ref=sr_1_1?dchild=1&hvadid=77859194047173&hvbmt=be&hvdev=c&hvqmt=e&keywords=assata+shakur+biography&qid=1598572839&sr=8-1&tag=mh0b-20>

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