

East-West Relations

13. Early solidarity with South Africa – Edelgard Nkobi-Goldberg and Friends

By Elisabeth Quart

When I took up African Studies at Leipzig's Karl Marx University in 1962, I could not have imagined that on 11 April 2013, with countless friends, companions and sympathisers, I would be able to honour and praise Denis Goldberg, the outstanding South African fighter for human rights and human dignity, against racism and oppression, on his eightieth birthday.

My studies began after the famous Africa Year of 1960 when, after Guinea and Ghana, 17 African states won their national independence. The Africa Institute of Leipzig University had been closed in 1938 by the German fascist government. In 1960 it was re-opened by the leadership of the German Democratic Republic and in 1962 studies began.

At that time the African National Congress (ANC) had already been fighting for 50 years against racial discrimination and the ever more perfected policy of the racist regime in South Africa. Amongst my fellow students were Edelgard Schulreich, later to become Denis Goldberg's second wife, and Edelgard's first husband, Zenzo Nkobi. He was the eldest son of a leading member of the ANC. Another fellow student was Joan Oehme, nee Nair. She was South African and, like Zenzo, had been delegated by the ANC to study in the GDR. Joan's brother, Billy Nair, a leading member of the ANC, was arrested in 1963, and in 1964, in a trial related to the Rivonia trial, sentenced to 20 years imprisonment on Robben Island. His cell was opposite Nelson Mandela's.

In seminars and discussions Zenzo and Joan gave us students of African Studies extensive up-to-date information about the situation in South Africa and the activities of the anti-Apartheid forces. In 1967 I

completed my studies. Edelgard and Joan later began to work in Berlin. I went to Guinea where a youth brigade from the GDR was training apprentices in a motor cycle workshop and serviced and repaired motor cycles. The GDR delivered a large number of motor cycles of the 'MZ' type from the Zschopau Motor Works in Saxony to Guinea. We lived in a former farm building on the edge of the town of Conakry.

I will never forget the reception for Miriam Makeba at Conakry airport in 1967. She had come at the invitation of President Sekou Toure. At an evening reception in Sekou Toure's residence, the singer and opponent of Apartheid, already world famous, spoke about the reasons for her exile and her feelings on standing once more on African soil. Then the problems in South Africa were once again present. At that time Denis Goldberg and the other leading members of the ANC who had been sentenced in the Rivonia trial had already been in prison for four years.

Between 1973 and 1975 I worked in the GDR Solidarity Committee. This committee rendered aid in humanitarian catastrophes and supported national liberation movements. At that time there was already a broad field of cooperation between social forces in the GDR and opponents of Apartheid in South Africa. From 1967 *Sechaba*, the journal of the ANC, and other publications were printed and dispatched for the ANC in the GDR. We collected signatures for the freeing of the political prisoners in South Africa, prepared calendars and shopping bags with designs by African artists, printed posters against colonialism, racism and Apartheid and sold them at solidarity bazaars.

In May 1974 in Berlin we mounted a photo exhibition, 'Apartheid No'. It was opened at the same time as the UN Special Committee on Apartheid was meeting in Berlin. We workers at the Solidarity Committee spoke in factories, schools and other places, to deepen the feelings of solidarity among the population. The GDR also supported the military struggle of the ANC, in particular by training military cadres in the GDR. In 1963 the first delegation of the ANC visited our Solidarity Committee. In 1973 the ANC was able to open a mission with semi-diplomatic status in Berlin.

Edelgard was already married to Zenzo Nkobi at that time. She worked for the official GDR press agency in Berlin. In 1975 Edelgard

left the GDR with Zenzo. She lived first in the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), later in Zambia and Zimbabwe. She reported from there about developments in southern Africa for various newspapers and journals, for example, for *Neues Deutschland* and *Afrika Sued*. Her articles, mostly published under the pseudonym Hanna Ndlovu, were highly valued by Africa experts.

Edelgard was an outstanding journalist. Readers could always rely on her information. She was able to place current developments in a historical context and make political connections clear. Her husband Zenzo worked as a photo reporter for the ANC and other liberation organisations in southern Africa. Edelgard knew the course of the liberation struggles in this region better than almost all other journalists. Thanks to her contacts with many personalities, numerous journeys and her presence on the spot, she always conveyed a real picture of developments in the region and never lost a critical view of them.

My work also took me to many African countries. I have fond memories of Dar es Salaam. At a lovely celebratory meeting for the 1st of May, GDR citizens who lived there presented money and little presents which GDR children in the kindergarten and school had made for the children in the ANC refugee centre in Tanzania. Through the years there were many such experiences.

In 1987 the ANC was honoured in many meetings in the GDR for its 75 year long struggle against racism and for the freedom and equality of the citizens of South Africa. I will never forget the enormous joy I felt when my Leipzig University awarded an honorary doctorate to Nelson Mandela in November 1987. The then ANC President Oliver Tambo accepted the certificate for Nelson Mandela. Later I gave photos of the ceremony at Leipzig University to Denis, who put them at the disposal of the newly created museum in Liliesleaf.

I met Edelgard again after her husband Zenzo died in 1993. We had founded the German African Society (DAFRIG) with sections in Berlin and Leipzig in 1991. Edelgard frequently spoke at meetings of our society about developments in southern Africa. One day in Berlin she introduced me to Denis. He too was a popular guest at our meetings.

When my husband and I first wanted to visit South Africa in 2000, we discussed our projected route with Edelgard and Denis. For us up to 1989 South Africa had been a country 'behind the iron curtain.' After the trip, which was in fact our first direct contact with South Africa, many relations, friends, colleagues and acquaintances wanted to know what impressions we had brought back with us. The former citizens of the GDR were particularly interested. We reported our experiences and encountered a strong interest in getting to know South Africa.

In the past twelve years my husband and I have travelled to South Africa with 30 tourist groups. The itineraries included meetings with Billy Nair, who lived until his death in October 2008 near Durban, with Edelgard and Denis in Cape Town, visits to Robben Island – sometimes accompanied by Denis – visits to the memorial for Chief Albert Luthuli, for many years President of the ANC, in a little place called Groutville near Stanger, and other historical places. In this way we got to know more than the beautiful countryside and the customs of different groups of inhabitants of South Africa.

The campaign which Denis initiated in London to collect books for South African children also influenced our tour programme. Olive Goll was an important partner for Denis in this project. She was responsible for the further education of teachers in KwaZulu-Natal and farm buildings near Scottburgh had been put at her disposal for the purpose. Olive ran distance courses for teachers by radio and further education courses in the big rooms of the farm. The locality was suitable for storing, unpacking, sorting and dispatching to the schools of the province the contents of a shipping container - 50,000 books. Olive had to organize help for the task, of course, which she found among white women as well.

We visited different schools in KwaZulu-Natal Province and everywhere, in almost every classroom, the teachers and pupils showed us proudly a corner with a book case. Books for blacks to borrow hardly existed in Apartheid times. They encouraged black children in particular to read. The visits to the schools, which were often remote from the main roads, surrounded by green hills in rural areas, also showed us the challenges which the ANC faced and still faces today. The children had mostly a walk to school of 60 minutes

morning and afternoon. The law says that all pupils should have a hot lunch in the schools, but the reality was often different, unfortunately.

On our trips we also visited families from different groups of the population of KwaZulu-Natal: Zulu, Indian and white. Here we heard about this or that feature of family life, heard something of the experiences of families during Apartheid times and opinions about life since 1994. These meetings in the private surroundings of the hosts conveyed unforgettable impressions of the past and present of the country.

In March 2003 Edelgard and Denis joined one of our tour groups. Neither of them had previously been to KwaZulu-Natal Province. During our tour Denis spoke to a farmer of German origin who had headed Radio Zulu for several years in apartheid times and undoubtedly knew the politics of Mangosuthu Buthelezi's Inkatha Party well. This party was the declared opponent of the ANC and even in the years after 1990 was still responsible for the murders of ANC activists and sympathisers. The attacks against ANC offices and meetings only stopped when Buthelezi was made Minister of Home Affairs under Nelson Mandela. Kurt Woerner, Denis's conversation partner, was born in South Africa, had studied history and had taken over the running of the farm after the death of his father. He was the same age as Denis. We were witnesses to a calm, well-balanced, objective conversation about the current situation in the country and the remaining tasks to overcome the heritage of the Apartheid period. Both men loved their country and were interested in its well-being. Here Denis's great character showed itself; he was able without gloating and without reservation to speak to a representative of 'the other side of the barricade' after the victory of his movement over Apartheid.

My generation, which was born during the years of the Second World War and did not have to suffer a war in Europe after that, would wonder, at least in the GDR, how the anti-nazis could persist with their resistance against national socialist barbarity in the years from 1933 to 1945. The active opponents of German fascism, like the fighters against apartheid policies in South Africa, experienced the torture and murder of their companions. Courage of their convictions, a consciousness of responsibility and love for their fellow human

beings made them active opponents of the regime. In doing so they risked imprisonment and even their lives.

I have always asked myself how the Rivonia prisoners succeeded in never giving up, in believing in the victory of their cause and in maintaining the hope that they would live to see their freedom. When Billy Nair was sentenced in 1964, he had 20 years of imprisonment before him. So there was a goal. Denis was sentenced to four times life imprisonment. Where was the goal there?

Denis has a wonderful temperament. He is a happy person, who likes to laugh and whose laugh is infectious. He always tries to work out solutions to a problem. Although he can be wounded, he keeps a shell inside himself, so that his soul cannot be entirely destroyed. That must surely also be a result of his long years of imprisonment, when warders and officials of the repressive regime tried again and again to undermine his morale and kill his soul. For him there were many factors and experiences which helped him to see survival as a permanent task and to deploy his resources to ensure that he remained the victor over his tormentors. A strong will, a firm confidence in himself, an unconquerable belief in the cause for which he had been imprisoned, and a deep feeling of love and respect for his own family, his comrades in struggle and other human beings were part of that.

Our joy was enormous when the ANC won the elections in 1994 and Nelson Mandela became the first freely elected President of South Africa. We felt with all the friends who could experience those days as the greatest reward for their struggle, full of privations, hard and unutterably painful, for the overthrow of the racist, inhuman regime in South Africa.

It is good that Denis and Edelgard published together important books about the resistance to the Apartheid regime in German translation, and thus made them accessible to a wider readership. With the 2010 publication of his autobiography, *The Mission: A life for freedom in South Africa*, Denis has continued this valuable work to combat forgetting, to preserve the experiences and the evaluation of history from the point of view of the participants. This is of great importance in order to communicate the course of the almost century long struggle of the ANC to the generations which follow. No outsider can deliver the authentic information contained in these books.

Edelgard translated the book by Tim Jenkin, *Escape from Pretoria*, (the original published in English in 1987) about a sensational prison break-out by three young white opponents of Apartheid from a high security wing of the prison in Pretoria, the same wing where Denis spent many years of his imprisonment. This book gives deep, detailed insights into the daily life of the prisoners, their feelings, problems, fears, worries and the dirty tricks they had to face every day. Denis had a share in the success of the scheme of the three men, who had been given long prison sentences under the Anti Terrorism Act for protesting against Apartheid with leaflet actions. The German edition of the book, *Und vor uns die Freiheit, (Freedom ahead of us)* has an article by Denis on this spectacular escape and an epilogue by Edelgard. A further important book for understanding the struggle of the ANC is *The State against Mandela* by the lawyer Joel Joffe, published in England in 1995, which deals with the Rivonia trial. Edelgard translated this book as well and, as with Tim Jenkin's book, was able to rely on Denis's detailed knowledge during the work. The German edition, *Der Staat gegen Mandela*, has a foreword by Denis and an epilogue by Edelgard. She also translated and published Ronnie Kasrils book *Armed and Dangerous* as *Stechbrieflich versucht*.

Although she had already had to undergo several years of treatment for cancer, Edelgard finished the translation of Joffe's book and assisted with putting it to press in our summer 2006. We all hoped she would be strong enough to defeat her illness. I visited Edelgard and Denis at the beginning of October 2006 in Hout Bay and did not want to believe this would be my last meeting with Edelgard. We were the guests of Hillary Hamburger, who was able to visit Denis for 14 of his years in prison, made trips around the Cape, marvelled at the mother whales with their babies and went for short walks. Edelgard worked for a few hours every day. As in previous times, she could write an article ready for the press in a few hours. At the end of December she died in a hospital in Cape Town. To the end she was courageous and concerned to spare Denis, their children and friends the grief over her passing away.

For Denis work was the best distraction after this heavy blow of fate. In the course of his readings in Germany, he came several times to Berlin. There, in June 2007, he presented the book by Joel Joffe at a

joint meeting of the German African Society (DAFRIG) and the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation (RLS). The latter financed the German edition of the book.

On the occasion of the hundredth anniversary of the foundation of the ANC in January 2012, the RLS and DAFRIG, together with the Solidarity Service International and AfricaVenir, held a conference in Berlin on the theme ‘A liberation movement becomes the governing power’, at which Denis was the main speaker. On the evening before the conference we showed the documentary film *Comrade Goldberg* in a Berlin cinema. Denis was there and at the end of the film answered questions from the public openly and candidly; concerns about current political, economic and social problems in South Africa arose in the course of these questions. He clarified how the ANC government since 1994 has improved the living conditions of the groups of the population which had been most disadvantaged in the time of Apartheid. New houses with access to electricity and clean water had been built. Social security payments like pensions and child benefit had been introduced. The present-day living conditions in South Africa are in comparison with other African states many times better and as a result the reason for a continuous stream of immigrants who today make up at least ten per cent of the people who live in South Africa.

But 19 years are not enough to solve the range of economic and social problems which have arisen in more than 100 years among the majority of the now roughly 50 million inhabitants of South Africa. In addition, the international political and economic framework has become more complicated and more difficult. The forcible imposition of neo-liberal economic structures, for example, makes more difficult the solution of reducing the high unemployment rate in the formal economy.

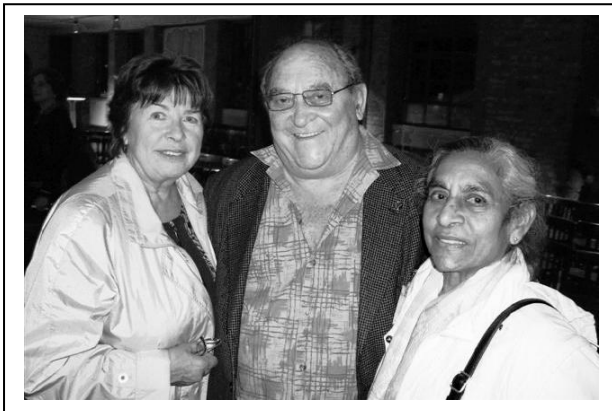
Many citizens of South Africa and with them friends of the ANC are deeply concerned to see that today a range of social phenomena torpedo the declared aims of the ANC and endanger the national peace. These include corruption at all levels of society, widespread incompetence of administrations, immeasurable enrichment of certain leading functionaries, nepotism, ignorance or finding excuses for continuing problems. These and increasing shortages, for example, in the provision of public goods and services (energy, health service)

undermine the credibility of the ANC. The strikes and unrest in 2012 made this painfully obvious.

Denis is independent enough to clearly name such problems and point to the dangers they hold for the further development of the country. His life was and is bound up with the struggle for the realization of the aims formulated in the 1955 Freedom Charter of the ANC. He works tirelessly for this since his release from prison 28 years ago. Denis has been repeatedly honoured in South Africa and abroad for his struggle against Apartheid and for the realization of the aims of the ANC before and after the free elections of 1994.

May his health allow him to continue to be active for his cause and may he have joy and success in the process. We remain at his side and heartily congratulate him on his eightieth birthday.

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Elizabeth 'Lissy' Quart, Denis, Joan Oehme
Foto by Bodo Quart