

## 25. Rainbow at the Cape – for a new South Africa

By Lutz van Dijk

When I was still banned from entry to South Africa in the 1980s, I only knew his name from the literature about the trial against Nelson Mandela, in which he was not only the youngest but also one of the few white accused.

And even after 1997, when I regularly travelled to South Africa and in 2001 even moved there from Amsterdam to Cape Town with my partner, at first we did not meet in person. The first ‘almost’ meeting was in 2002 in a hotel in Osnabruck, when the nice gentleman in the reception asked, “Oh, you’re from South Africa? Do you know Denis Goldberg?”

“Yes, he’s famous in South Africa. But why do you ask?”

“Oh, because he was here a month ago!” And then he added with a laugh, “He stayed in the same room and slept in the same bed that you have now. That doesn’t bother you, does it?”

“Of course not,” I laughed back. And I decided to tell him one day, if I actually did meet him, that we had already shared a bed, if not at the same time.

Through Denis’s friends in Osnabruck and Essen contact was soon established in South Africa too – and I had the pleasant surprise to discover that he had just moved with his wife to Hout Bay, about half an hour’s drive from our township of Masiphumelele. We had shortly before opened the first home for children and young people affected by HIV/AIDS, supported by local activists and a leading nurse from the day clinic there.

This was at a time when Thabo Mbeki was President of South Africa and his Health Minister, Manto Tshabalala-Msimang, was still publicly stating that anti-retroviral medicines (up to now the only

medicine which prevents the spread of the virus in the human body) had too many harmful side effects, were far too complicated for poor people to use and besides that it was not clear whether HIV would develop into AIDS anyway. The Health Minister recommended instead fresh vegetables as a cure, particularly beetroot, which led to her worldwide nickname of Dr Beetroot.

Concretely on the spot, however, this meant that for years many poor people, children and adults, died because they did not receive life saving medicines in state institutions (like hospitals or even state recognized children's homes). Harvard University later came to the conclusion in an independent study that as a result of this policy in the years from 2000 to 2005 alone more than 330,000 South Africans had died unnecessarily. (29)

In the HOKISA Children's Home we ignored this ruling from 2002 to 2004, and began, against the state instruction, to administer medicines to the children entrusted to us. All these children have survived and are going to schools today, some of them to secondary schools. From 2004 adult patients, as well as parents and those with parental authority, could decide for themselves about the medicines. But free distribution and regular checks, especially in rural areas and townships, would not be introduced for a long time for many patients.

I will never forget Denis's first visit to our children's home in Masiphumelele Township, where about 40,000 people have to live in the direst poverty. The weighty, friendly man came in and laughed heartily, because a little boy had addressed him as "Tata Denis – Father Denis", and answered, "Hayi, thamkhulu Denis – no, I'm Granddad Denis!" So the ice was broken already, before he had even taken his seat on our big sofa and all the children had sat round him to hear how it was when he had fought against Apartheid as the friend of Nelson Mandela. Denis reported to the children about life in the underground and how he was then put on trial with Nelson and the others. Even the little ones, who did not understand every detail, listened, because here was someone who knew Madiba, who was revered by everybody, and had even worked with him.

Then Denis told how the judge, announcing the verdict, had muttered so that he was scarcely understandable. And how everybody had trembled about whether they would be sentenced to death. The verdicts were, however, all multiple life sentences, in Denis's case four

times life. But Denis's mother in the public gallery had still not understood and called full of fear, "Denis, what did he say?" And Denis, without permission, shouted back the Jewish toast, "Le Chaim – cheers! To life!" All the children laughed in relief with him. What a history lesson!

Denis visited us in the HOKISA Children's Home again and again during the following years, often with his wife Edelgard Nkobi or visitors from England or Germany whom he simply brought with him, nearly always without advance notice. Granddad Denis was allowed to do that!

Having Denis as a fatherly friend means a lot not only to the children, but to the teachers as well. Once I asked him to sign our English copy of Mandela's *Long Way to Freedom*. On 27 November 2005 he wrote on the first page, "For you at HOKISA – with every good wish for the important work that you are doing in South Africa! New situations demand new ideas! It was our task to make it possible for others to build the new!"

In the coming months we saw him less often and at first did not know why. Then we learned the sad truth: his wife Edelgard was ill with cancer and the prognosis was not good. When Edelgard died in December 2006, Denis had just left the hospital after his last nightly visit to her. Although otherwise he often had visitors at home with him, on this morning no one was there. The news spread only gradually at first. I spontaneously packed a bag with food and drove to Hout Bay; after all, we were almost neighbours. Denis spoke so lovingly of his wife. They had both had so many plans in the beautiful new house on the hillside with its view over the harbour.

Although Denis has many friends and often receives invitations, he also came to us sometimes for dinner. One evening, however, became unexpectedly difficult. Somehow the conversation got round to the catastrophic AIDS policy of Thabo Mbeki and his Health Minister. But Denis's view on that evening was contrary to ours: the Minister had only been repeatedly misquoted. After all, she herself was a doctor and knew what she was talking about. The criticism of her was without exception propaganda from the patients' organisation Treatment Action Campaign. It grew silent at the table. When I and others contradicted Denis, he was visibly annoyed. The evening ended early and in a distinctly bad atmosphere.

After that we did not see each other for some time. But we still followed what else he was doing by way of mutual friends or in articles in the local press.

In October 2006 a terrible fire broke out in Masiphumelele in which in one night more than 1,200 people lost everything; by a miracle no one died, but many people, including children, were injured. Even the national evening news bulletin reported on it. The fire had broken out in one of the two 'informal settlements' of our township, where there are neither sewage system nor access roads. The fire brigade had arrived late and then had only tried to prevent the fire from spreading to other areas.

It was not the first fire in this neighbourhood, where the simple huts, often made of discarded wood and tin, quickly caught fire when people cooked on an open fire or tried to keep warm at night. But for the first time the people were not prepared simply to build new huts on the ashes and wait for the next accident. A group of residents began to gather in the meeting room of the HOKISA Peace House and discuss ways out of the hardship.

Finally a courageous plan arose: with the help of an architect from the neighbouring, overwhelmingly white, small town, and with me as fundraiser, an application would be made to the government for a state building subsidy. For the families who had lost everything in the fire and now wanted to participate, small two-room flats for rent would be built in two- to three-storey houses on the burnt out land. Sick and old people who had no income would be able to live rent-free. After four years' rent, the flats would become the property of the inhabitants. Of 400 families more than 350 decided to participate.

For months the home building initiative, which had given itself the name of 'Amakhaya ngoku – Homes now!' took on simply insurmountable hurdles. The officials in the housing ministry responsible rejected the initiative outright as unrealistic. In the township there were even demonstrations by people who lived elsewhere and who were afraid that they would stay on the state waiting list for longer as a result.

But the group did not give up. The first office was opened in Shack No 10, in a resident's living room, with borrowed computers. There began the registration of those who wanted to take part. Planned arson attacks on the office were prevented twice. When all the plans had been

submitted in accordance with the regulations, and the ANC government responsible still refused to even consider the application, we decided on a blockade of the Ministry for Housing in Cape Town. Before dawn we drove 30 kilometres into the town and stood there with placards in front of the main entrance, even before the first officials came to work. The press had only positive reports about Amakhaya ngoku – and at last there was movement in the official apparatus.

A provisional permission to build and a partial building subsidy were approved at the end of 2008 and at the start of 2009 the first building work began. The Minister had given apologies at short notice for the ceremony on the start of construction – but Denis came and, alongside the then Mayor of Cape Town and prominent opposition politician Helen Zille, gave a speech orientated to the future. Even before the actual start of construction there was another attack on the office of the house building initiative in which several employees were injured. A South African friend who had herself been put in prison in the time of Apartheid for her involvement had warned us, “While there’s such great hardship and competition for homes don’t kid yourselves – what you are starting is very important but it will also be a minefield!”

On this path through the minefield Denis Goldberg is at our side. We have never again spoken about the conflict over the then Health Minister. We met again in person when a filmmaker suddenly offered to make a publicity film for us. He wanted at all costs to have prominent people in it. After Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Denis Goldberg was the second to accept.

The appointment for filming on location was postponed several times as a result of persistent rain and wind. On a cold winter’s day the filmmaker phoned early in the morning and asked nevertheless, “Can Professor Goldberg come today? We have to go to Johannesburg tomorrow and today is the last chance to film!” I phoned Denis and started off with long explanations and apologies and finally with the plea if, despite the short notice, he could possibly come. Denis answered without hesitation, “Well of course I’ll come. When and where?”

And then we both stand in the driving rain in front of Shack No 10 and Denis gives a moving plea for support for Amakhaya ngoku as the

camera films: “To everybody who has means, however modest: anybody can see how the people here still have to live, in this foul weather and in flooded hovels. It cannot go on like this. Please help, and support this project!”

At the celebratory opening for the first house for rent for 33 families it is Denis Goldberg again who comes and makes a speech, alongside Helen Zille who has in the meantime risen to become the Premier of the Western Cape, and who is at the same time National Chairperson of the opposition party Democratic Alliance. ANC friends criticize him for it. But Denis counters their argument with, “This isn’t a question of party politics; it’s about people who need a roof over their heads!”

An old man who speaks for the tenants says, “I am more than 70 years old now and for the first time I have running water and even a warm shower. At the weekend my whole family are coming over; all of them will have a shower at home for the first time in their lives.”

Also thanks to Denis’s efforts, we are finding new and important donors, through his organisation Community H.E.A.R.T. in Great Britain amongst others. He informs himself regularly about the progress of the project and advises us over problems with local politicians, but also when there are internal conflicts in the township. Up to now 230 of the families who at that time were victims of the fire have moved into one of the flats, which are equipped with solar panels to heat the water. About 120 families are still waiting in huts on a nearby field. We will not give up. In the meantime reports about Amakhaya ngoku have appeared in newspapers all over the country and despite many problems, familiar to every house-building project, most of the inhabitants of Masiphumelele are proud of this quarter. Children can play safely in the streets here. A meeting hall was financed by the German Lower Saxony lottery, facilitated by Reinhard Stolle of the Third World Action Centre in Osnabruck. Weddings and services take place there and in the future the first day nursery school in the quarter will open its doors.

In Cape Town Denis and I meet regularly, at events at the International German School, the German Consulate General, at political discussions or simply at dinners with friends from Europe and South Africa. And he still comes regularly for visits at the HOKISA Children’s Home – a lovely surprise every time. We still stay at the

same hotel in Osnabruck when we are in Germany for lectures. We still haven't come across each other there at the same time.

All the small and big people at the HOKISA Children's Home, as well as many inhabitants of Masiphumelele, thank Denis Goldberg for everything he has done for them, and wish him many more years of good health and unbroken critical spirit. I personally thank you, dear Denis, for your friendship and sincerity, which does not rule out that we sometimes – not often – have different opinions. I have learned a great deal from you.

Thank you very much – enkosi kakhulu, u Tata no u Melwane Denis!

(29) Harvard School of Public Health, Boston, Report 20<sup>th</sup> October 2008.

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