

ANC Ambassador in Exile

11. Denis Goldberg in Scotland and the UK: educating, inspiring, organising

by Brian Filling

“Never, never, and never again shall it be that this beautiful land will again experience the oppression of one by another and suffer the indignity of being the skunk of the world.” President Nelson Mandela, 10 May 1994.

These words of Nelson Mandela were delivered at his Inauguration as President of the Republic of South Africa in the amphitheatre of the Union Buildings in Pretoria.

I sat beside Esme and Denis Goldberg listening to the Presidential address in what had been the government buildings of Verwoerd, Vorster, Botha and De Klerk. As we watched the South African air force flypast overhead, with the new South African flag emblazoned on the wings of the planes, Denis remarked that he couldn't quite believe that these planes were now on the side of the people rather than conducting mayhem on the Front-line states. We recalled Chile and the violent overthrow engineered by the CIA of the democratically elected government of President Allende in 1973 and thought, ‘Will South Africa be different?’ Denis joked how, as he sat in his prison cell down the hill from Union buildings, he had attempted to do a ‘Yuri Geller’ and bend the wings of the aeroplanes during the Apartheid-era Presidential flypasts while he was incarcerated for 22 years.

All over the amphitheatre old friends and comrades were meeting, embracing, shaking hands, exchanging stories, rejoicing in their victory. Some who had travelled the world as exiles from apartheid had been sworn in the previous day as Members of Parliament in Cape Town. Some were about to become Cabinet Ministers. It was a momentous day.

One of those emotional meetings was between Denis and Andimba Toivo ja Toivo, at that time Minister of Energy in Namibia. They recalled when they had first met as young men in a progressive youth organisation, the Modern Youth Society, in the 1950s in Cape Town. They were both jailed in the 1960s, Andimba with Mandela and Sisulu and the other black political prisoners on Robben Island and Denis in Pretoria Central prison along with the other white political prisoners. The absurdity of apartheid reached everywhere. The two comrades had not seen one another since their imprisonment. Andimba said that he couldn't quite believe that he was standing with Denis in the citadel of apartheid watching the inauguration of Nelson Mandela with whom he had spent more than 20 years on Robben Island.

The day after the Inauguration, Elias Motsoaledi died in Soweto. Elias had been one of the eight Rivonia trialists sentenced to life imprisonment and had served 26 years imprisonment on Robben Island. He had been ill for some time but had struggled out to vote in the first democratic, non-racial election on 27 April. He had watched the Inauguration on television and died the following day.

I visited the Motsoaledi family home in Soweto with Denis and Mara Louw, the South African singer and television star, to pay our respects to the family. As the queue of mourners moved nearer the house we met many veterans of the struggle such as John Nkadimeng, former General Secretary of the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU), and Jay Naidoo, former General Secretary of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and newly appointed Minister without Portfolio in the new Mandela government, charged with responsibility for the Reconstruction and Development Programme.

We reached the house and sat in a room waiting to see Caroline, Elias' widow, and the family, along with other mourners unfamiliar to us. As introductions were made and it became clear that this was THE Denis Goldberg of Rivonia fame, the whole room became animated and Denis was showered with congratulations and questions. As it transpired some of those present had spent many years on Robben Island but were in awe of this white man who had made such a sacrifice. Their enthusiasm at meeting Denis was testimony to the non-racial approach of the African National Congress.

Working for the ANC 1985-1994

I first met Denis following his release from prison in 1985 and then worked with him in the anti-apartheid struggle until 1994 and the end of apartheid. After that historic watershed we continued to work closely together on the reconstruction and development of the new South Africa through Community H.E.A.R.T. (Health, Education and Reconstruction Training) and various other projects.

For the nine years following his release until the first democratic election in South Africa, Denis traversed much of the world on speaking tours on behalf of ANC from his London base. He did a six week tour of Finland, Denmark, Sweden, and Norway; often visited the United States, including speaking at the United Nations; Canada and much of Europe.

The civil servants union in Scotland, led by Pat Kelly, organised “Nights for ANC” in Edinburgh, bringing together musicians and comedians to raise funds. Denis was the regular ANC speaker.

I organised a speaking tour of Scotland for Denis in 1986. *The Herald* newspaper agreed to an interview and, in typical media fashion, the accompanying photograph had Denis standing behind bars. He must have spoken to many thousands of people about the struggle against apartheid and he had the same effect everywhere, inspiring audiences and capturing the media.

His speaking style is neither that of a firebrand nor tub thumper. He explained his approach in his autobiography, *The Mission: a life for freedom in South Africa*:

“All my life I had heard speakers shouting into microphones with strain in their voices as though every word had equal weight. Reading Shakespeare in prison I saw how he built up each scene, and successive scenes were built into an Act with the dramatic tension reaching a climax. Then he started on another line of his drama in a second act and again building to a climax. Until in the final act all the threads of the dramatic tale are drawn together. You therefore speak about many details fairly quietly and informatively, carrying your audience to the point you wish to make. Then starting again and building up to another reason to condemn apartheid, and another, and

ending perhaps, with a throwaway line explaining what help they could give to change the lives of many people.”

Denis could have added that speeches laced with humour also appeal to audiences and draw people into the clutches of the speaker. And Denis’s speeches always contain wit alongside the serious stuff. He has people laughing out loud and then brings tears to their eyes not just in the same speech but sometimes in the same scene if not in the same sentence.

He has long been known for his humour. George Bizos in his memoir, *Odyssey to Freedom*, relates the feelings of the defence lawyers in the 1963 Rivonia trial, “To our relief...he (Denis) successfully avoided any witticisms and controlled his expressions”, when under examination by the prosecution.

But Denis doesn’t manipulate audiences. As he wrote in *The Mission*, “Because I don’t like demagoguery I decided when I came out of prison to appeal to people through a simply stated logical argument. Naturally an appeal to emotions of abhorrence of the brutality of apartheid would play a role, but only as a way to open minds to a logical argument.”

As well as giving speeches to audiences, large and small, in many countries he acted as the ANC spokesperson to the media. His ability to condense complex ideas into short, sharp, accessible messages was perfect for media interviews, in which often the next question is being asked before most people have had time to answer the previous question.

Denis also took on the role of creating and distributing ANC merchandise. It started with T-shirts, and then there were button badges, flags, caps, coffee mugs and jewellery. The range of goods kept growing to include sterling silver pendants of the MK Warrior, high quality enamel badges, brooches, earrings, pens and watches. All of the merchandise carried the ANC logo or symbols. It was great publicity for the ANC as thousands of people identified themselves publicly with the ANC. Of course, the support had to be there otherwise the goods would not have sold but Denis’ contribution in this regard was to find ways that allowed people to express their support and to draw them towards ANC. The merchandising was linked to fund-raising and here Denis also played an important role.

All of this showed Denis's creativity and innovation, characteristics which George Bizos described in his memoir. He wrote, "On a writing pad and the back of his empty cigarette boxes, Denis drew greeting cards and pictures, some of which he cut into small pieces of various shapes and sizes as puzzles for our children. His inventiveness served him and his fellow prisoners well for many years."

This love and interest in children is another characteristic of Denis. He has seen the development of many children of anti-apartheid activists and as they have grown up he has become a friend. Becoming President of the Woodcraft Folk, a progressive children's organisation in Britain, in which Esme and their children had been active members, is just one expression of this.

Scottish delegation to South Africa 1994

The Anti-Apartheid Movement in Britain was dissolved in October 1994, six months after the South African election, which signalled the end of apartheid. The successor organisation, Action for Southern Africa (ACTSA), was immediately formed.

The following day a thirty-three strong Scottish delegation departed from the UK for a ten day visit to South Africa. Denis had been invited to join the delegation as a special friend of many people and organisations in Scotland and to assist with introductions and advice during the visit. From a government hosted lunch in Parliament via visits to townships in Jo'burg, Cape Town and the Eastern Cape to a reception in Cape Town barracks hosted by the Deputy Minister of Defence, Ronnie Kasrils, it was a most remarkable trip.

The delegation was given a tour of Parliament by a pleasant, but apartheid-trained, tour guide. After a few interjections, additional comments and explanations by Denis the tour guide generously handed the tour over to him. Denis then proceeded to give the delegates a wonderful history of the building from an anti-apartheid perspective. He described the tri-cameral parliament, which had given seats to Indian and Coloured members, whilst retaining majority control for the Whites. He showed us the Tuynhuis, where Mandela was brought from prison to meet President Botha.

During the visit many meetings were held with the new leaders of the country in which we learned about the legacy of colonialism and apartheid and the challenges of reconstruction and development. The meeting with Cyril Ramaphosa, in which he was explaining and discussing the new constitution, was running over time and we were due to visit the Rape Crisis Centre Cape Town. The women delegates left the meeting to avoid being late and then had a discussion as to whether men should be included in the visit. Apparently after a heated discussion it was agreed that Denis, who had organised the visit to the Centre, and I, as leader of the delegation should accompany the women. On arrival at the Centre, Denis was rapturously welcomed by the South African women, who saw Denis as a great supporter of their work. In the discussions that followed they made the argument that men needed to be included in their campaign if the horrendous problem of rape was to be overcome in their society. Denis's connection and support for the Rape Crisis Centre has continued to this day.

The visits to townships like Khayelitsha and Soweto meant the delegates saw for themselves the terrible living conditions of many South Africans. The shacks, dreadful sanitation, no electricity and the lack of clean water were graphic examples of the legacy of apartheid. However, the people were warm, hospitable and very friendly and they expressed their new-found dignity.

We also visited the Eastern Cape, which has a long historical connection with Scotland through the mission schools established by Scots missionaries in the nineteenth century. Lovedale, one of these mission schools and the longest-lasting, non-racial educational institution, was attended by many future South African leaders, including another of Denis's fellow Rivonia trialists, Govan Mbeki, who was named after the first Principal, William Govan from Glasgow. The University of Fort Hare was also established by Scots missionaries in 1916 and many African leaders studied there, including Nelson Mandela and Oliver Tambo.

One of the highlights of the trip was the meeting, hosted by Govan Mbeki, then Deputy President of the Senate (later to become the National Council of Provinces), in the members' tearoom in Parliament in Cape Town.

During our visit to the Eastern Cape we had a meeting with the new Premier, Raymond Mhlaba, also a fellow Rivonia trialist of Denis. They were like old friends who had never been apart despite the fact that following the trial they had spent more than twenty years in separate prisons. It was an emotional re-union. The problems facing the Eastern Cape Province were outlined by Raymond and included the difficulty of bringing together two separate Bantustans (Transkei and Ciskei) and the old Eastern Cape to form the new Province in post-apartheid South Africa.

Community H.E.A.R.T. 1995 – present

Denis did not have much difficulty in persuading the Scottish delegates of the need to continue their solidarity work. Denis, who, for family reasons, was not returning home but was going to remain in Britain, had decided to establish a charity, Community H.E.A.R.T. (Health, Education and Reconstruction Training) to assist with the redevelopment of his country. Towards the end of the visit he asked a few of us to form the Board of the new organisation and it was launched in the South African High Commission in London at an event in April 1995 with Denis as Director and myself as chair of the Board.

Denis worked extremely hard to make Community H.E.A.R.T. successful. He launched the “Book and Ten Pence Appeal”, which involved the collection, sorting and packing of books, which are then sent by container to South Africa. This took him all over Britain, speaking to all kinds of audiences from former members of the Anti-Apartheid Movement to a speaking tour round Edinburgh’s independent private schools, which resulted in the donation of many books and cash for the container to transport them. On another occasion in Edinburgh he was invited to give the Vote of Thanks after F W De Klerk, Deputy President in the South African Government of National Unity, delivered the prestigious Edinburgh Lecture. Denis commented that it was obvious “that Dr De Klerk had learned much from the African National Congress.”

He successfully bid for large-scale funding from Comic Relief for the Rape Crisis Centre in Cape Town. He launched a campaign for second-hand computers to be re-furbished and sent to South Africa,

which led to the founding of Computer Aid International. He built relations between South African educational institutions and those in the UK. Not only did he travel extensively throughout Great Britain and Ireland but he combined it with the establishment of Community H.E.A.R.T. in Germany and regular speaking tours there.

Esme died in 2000, and Denis asked me to conduct a rationalist commemoration of her life at the funeral. It was quite an event as it brought together Esme's family, many of her friends of all age groups and South Africans. It was not long afterwards that their daughter, Hilly, died. It was a hard time emotionally and Denis was exhausted by the work with Community H.E.A.R.T. It was time for a new start. Isobel McVicar replaced Denis as Director of Community H.E.A.R.T. and he was elevated to the position of Honorary President.

Return to South Africa

Denis returned to South Africa in 2002 with his new wife, Edelgard, as he had been appointed Special Adviser to the Minister of Water and Forestry Affairs, Ronnie Kasrils. He enjoyed this role as it took him all over the country and allowed him to meet, hear the concerns and take action on behalf of the people. Denis and Edelgard eventually settled in Hout Bay, near Cape Town. At their home they hosted braais for visiting delegations from Action for Southern Africa (ACTSA), often in the evening of their first day after visiting Robben Island. There could have been no better introduction to South Africa, its history and the challenges it faced than an "audience" with Denis.

Scottish Connections

Denis, following his first visit to Scotland in 1985, made numerous other visits over the years as ANC speaker, Director of Community H.E.A.R.T and after his return to South Africa. He travelled around the country educating, inspiring and organising people in the struggle against apartheid and later to assist with the reconstruction and development of the new South Africa. He made many friends and connections with people in the trade unions, churches, universities, the student movement, local authorities and he made many media

appearances. Over the 27 years since that first visit there are too many stories to tell!

In 2001 he spoke at the retiral event for Alan Campbell, Chair of the Fire Brigades Union in Scotland, at the Station Hotel in Perth. Following Denis's inspiring speech, Alan proposed that a collection should be taken for Community H.E.A.R.T. One brigade offered a substantial amount and then all the other brigades followed in emulation. £5000 was collected!

In December 2012, he visited Armadale Academy in West Lothian, to thank the staff and students for holding a concert to raise funds for the Kronendel Music Academy (KMA) in Hout Bay, one of his pet projects. Next day in a meeting with the Scottish Government Minister for External Affairs the idea of bringing a group of young musicians from KMA was greeted with enthusiasm. His good work continues!

Glasgow Caledonian University

Following Nelson Mandela's visit to Glasgow on 9 October 1993 to receive the Freedoms of nine UK Cities, Glasgow Caledonian University (GCU) offered an Honorary Doctorate to Mandela. This was accepted on the understanding that the university would assist with the reconstruction and development of the new South Africa.

Denis, on behalf of ANC, visited the university to discuss how it could assist and a small delegation including myself and Professor David Walsh visited South Africa just before the election of 1994. Denis introduced us to MEDUNSA (Medical University of South Africa) and there began a productive connection between the two universities. We also visited UNITRA (University of the Transkei) in the Eastern Cape, which led to that university adopting a problem-based nurse training curriculum assisted by GCU. Several senior university staff were seconded to UNITRA and MEDUNSA to assist with the development of the new programme and some of the South African staff undertook placements at Glasgow Caledonian University. This very positive and mutually beneficial partnership was facilitated and nurtured by Denis over the years.

In 1997 Denis was awarded an Honorary Doctor of Laws by Glasgow Caledonian University in recognition of his contribution to

the struggle against apartheid, his role in the reconstruction of the new South Africa and his services to the university. At the ceremony in the Glasgow Royal Concert Hall, attended by some 2,500 people, he was given a standing ovation following his acceptance speech. This had never happened before. To receive a standing ovation from an audience of such disparate people politically (the graduates from different academic disciplines, their siblings, mothers and fathers, grandparents and university staff) was unique and was testimony to not only Denis's sacrifice, bravery and intellect but also his way with words. Denis continued his association with the university as a Visiting Professor. The Students Association also elected him as their Honorary President.

The continuing Glasgow connection

On 4 August 2011 Denis was invited by the Lord Provost of Glasgow to unveil a plaque in the City Chambers to commemorate the 30th anniversary of Nelson Mandela receiving the Freedom of the City while he was still in prison in 1981. On 16 September 2011, Denis delivered the 4th Mandela-Tambo lecture at the City of Glasgow College. It was entitled, "Mandela-Tambo: friends, comrades, leaders: legacy".

In the lecture he referred to the "long history of contact between Scotland and South Africa" and said, "Of course, the early contact was that of Scottish soldiers serving the British Empire in the conquest of South Africa." Denis, who has a fondness for the songs of the Scottish folklorist, Hamish Henderson, quoting from his 'Freedom Come All Ye', said:

"He (Henderson) makes it clear that he is indeed writing about freedom and that also means freedom from harassment by Scottish soldiers (for the Empire of course)... and he says (Denis's translation),

*'broken families in lands we've harried
Will curse 'Scotland the Brave no more, no more'
Racism will have been defeated
'black and white to each other married.'
He (Henderson) continues: and*

'All the bairns of Adam will find bread and barley bree and painted room,'
when 'A black boy from yont Nyanga
Dings the fell gallows o' the burghers doon' "
(tears down the evil gallows of their apartheid masters)

In the same lecture Denis referred to the positive side of the Scottish connection: "But also there were missionaries and educators who played an important role through institutions such as the Lovedale College in the Eastern Cape Province. Many leaders of the African people gained their knowledge of the modern world at that institution."

On 26 November 2012 the City of Glasgow College presented Denis with their inaugural Global Scholar award. In his acceptance speech, Denis talked about the meaning of 'humanity.'

"I have looked at people in class conflict between owners and workers and the middle people, very well paid, who do the work of maintaining disunity and inequality among people in those conflicts and wondered about what it is to be human...

To be scholars, to try to understand our world in isolated academic ivory towers is to deny our innate human equality. Knowledge is for me and many millions of people, a guide to action...

Understanding the world is not enough. As human beings in society, we are called upon by our humanity to change the world, to make it a place of greater equality...

What I have learned through good times and bad, is that to be human, in the words of Nelson Mandela, 'We must so live our lives that we respect and advance the freedom of others.' "

Denis Goldberg has certainly lived his life in that way and we are all the better for it!

Brian Filling was vice principal of the Glasgow College of Building and Printing. He is currently Honorary Consul for South Africa in Scotland. He was a founder member of the Anti Apartheid Movement in Scotland, and Chairperson for many years. He is a lifelong supporter of the struggle against Apartheid, as Chairperson of ACTSA Scotland, Chairperson of Community H.E.A.R.T. and in many other capacities. In October 2012 President Zuma awarded him the National Order of Companions of O. R. Tambo, the highest honour given to non-South Africans involved in the struggle for liberation and reconstruction.

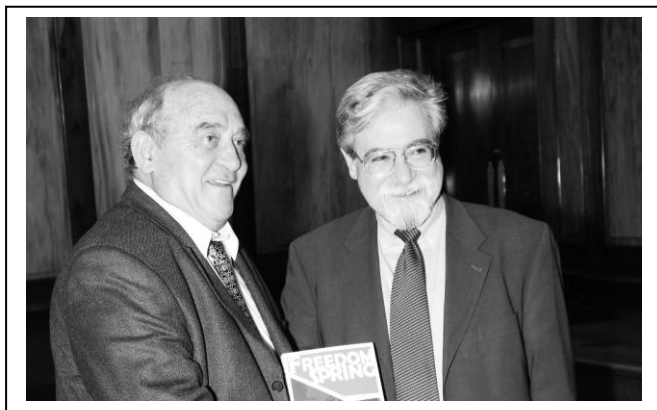


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