

20. Contemporary Witness and Fighter – a Very Special Lesson

By Guenter Hensch

Who is this courageous man? How does it feel to meet someone who has fought in an incomparable way for freedom – for the freedom of a whole nation? Will young people of today be interested in the South African and international struggle against Apartheid and become involved with this special person? Many questions filled my thoughts when I met Denis Goldberg about ten years ago on a warm early summer's day at Siegen Station. A friendship was to grow out of this first meeting.

Denis Goldberg was visiting Siegen at that time to give several talks, along with me, at Siegen schools. I had known of him for quite some time from Nelson Mandela's autobiography *The Long Walk to Freedom*, as well from other books, as Mandela's prominent white comrade-in-arms. The media had reported on him as well. His name was also well known to me from my activities in different campaigns against the Apartheid regime in South Africa. But only our meeting in person filled this name with life – a meeting which will remain unforgettable for me and which has lastingly shaped my work.

I was a little unsure before this first meeting. "Welcome to Siegerland," I greet Denis Goldberg on the platform of the railway station. "Oh, where am I? In Siegerland? What a funny name. I thought I came from a Siegerland – a victorious land [siegen = to be victorious] In my country we have beaten the oppressive system of Apartheid. I too live in a victorious land." Over his face passes a smile that is friendly and proud. His eyes light up! What amazement seizes me spontaneously! An appealing calmness and at the same time a recognizable desire for action radiate from him. In a few minutes we connected. I am seized with a huge curiosity about him, about his later

achievements. Joy in his infectious humour envelops me. My respect for his purposefulness and sincerity grows from minute to minute.

I only begin to understand more clearly the basis for the charisma and force of attraction of this respected fighter for his country's freedom in the course of this sunny morning. We have an appointment for an author's reading in a comprehensive school in the centre of Siegen. The hall fills noisily with more than 120 pupils, all the upper forms. The young people seek out and find their friendship groups.

The visitor from Cape Town smilingly enters the scene of the event. I feel a little proud that I, the extra mural educational adviser of the Protestant Church of Westphalia, have been able to organize this meeting. The noise of young voices quickly quiets down. "Hello," the elderly gentlemen with the interesting English sounding accent greets his listeners. "I'm Denis, Denis Goldberg, and I come from Cape Town, South Africa. It is nice to be able to be here with you; I am looking forward to it." On the last words he raises his voice a little; it sounds good humoured. In the hall it is now totally silent. Expectation, curiosity and also a spontaneous liking for the visitor are mirrored in the faces: Who is this? What has he got to tell? Hopefully it won't be boring! Their thoughts are not hard to guess.

After the greeting by the school principal and a few personal words to the speaker, I briefly outline the eventful and moving personal and political life of the honoured guest. I explain why he is currently on a tour of Germany and briefly tell about Apartheid in South Africa and about the self-sacrificing anti-apartheid struggle. When I mention Denis Goldberg's 22-year imprisonment, an audible murmur goes through the hall. Everyone looks in real shock now at this elderly man with his friendly smile and his open expression. Now he is visiting them in person. In Siegen! Companion in struggle and fellow prisoner of Nelson Mandela! Wow!

Calmly the fighter for freedom and human rights, unruffled as always, begins his biographical account. He starts by presenting his early childhood. His parents, members of the working class movement and active trade unionists, taught him to strive for social justice and equality of opportunity and to defend himself against oppression and exploitation. Unlike many others they did not differentiate between their fellow human beings according to skin colour or ethnicity. Instead, their maxim was solidarity practised among the working

population against any form of discrimination and exclusion. With impressive words Denis Goldberg describes demonstrations through Cape Town which he took part in even as a little child, sitting on his father's shoulders. He also remembers meetings with people "of all colours," who often sat together in his parents' home and discussed problems of the trade union struggle together over a meal.

He tells the little story of his first teacher, Miss Cook. Through her just and consistent behaviour, she taught him not to give in to the widespread prejudices against 'those who are different', and not to stigmatise them or even exclude them. She taught the child Denis to value every individual person, regardless of skin colour, appearance, disability, size, sex or religion. By doing this 'his dear Miss Cook' finally landed him in prison for 22 years. The young listeners are rather disturbed to hear this curious seeming sentence.

In further biographical episodes from his childhood and youth Denis Goldberg describes different experiences of the systematic social exclusion of Black and Coloured people in South Africa. He contrasts these experiences with his own development and life chances as a White person. To him it was totally unjust that he could achieve his career wish to become a civil engineer while the Black people of his age could not even go to school; totally unjust that he could start a family while the black people were socially excluded, physically separated from their families and systematically deprived of their rights.

With great concentration the young people listen to the contemporary witness, with his personal and historical accounts of the long freedom struggle of South Africa. They sense that they are present at a unique 'history lesson.' They learn fully authentic facts and background information about the unjust white regime of Apartheid which lasted many decades. They begin to piece together and understand the social consequences for the non-white majority population.

At the same time Denis Goldberg, with his simple and clear manner of speaking, in his inimitably charming and unassuming way, offers deep insights into his personal development. He demonstrates his path from ethical indignation in the face of daily injustice, to the political struggle for democracy – and even finally to armed resistance in the ANC against the racist dictatorship of the white minority.

The pupils thus have the opportunity to understand that social injustice can never last and that social oppression will always at some time provoke counterpressure and resistance from the oppressed. At the same time the basic ethical conviction that in the long term the perpetrators and beneficiaries of oppression can themselves not live in peace becomes clear. Injustice, discrimination and exclusion cannot be the basis of a true peace and cannot achieve democracy and a just state.

In short sequences Denis Goldberg presents other stations in his life. He tells how in 1963, along with other ANC fighters, he was arrested, and a year later, together with Nelson Mandela in the notorious Rivonia trial, condemned to life imprisonment. He reports on his time in the political prisoners section which was exclusively for whites, of the Maximum Security Prison in Pretoria – about the numerous acts of harassment by the guards there, various escape attempts by his political fellow prisoners. He describes his time of imprisonment without any false pathos; does not distort it retrospectively to make it an adventure story, and does not present himself as a hero.

He explains his release which forced him into exile immediately afterwards. He talks about again meeting his family, who lived in exile in London, and his first uncertain steps in freedom. And finally he speaks about his political tasks contributing to the building of democracy under the first president elected by the great majority of all South Africans, Nelson Mandela.

At the end Denis Goldberg reports on his charitable contributions to the social development and restructuring of the new South Africa. It is about grasping the topography of injustice and healing the wounds in the souls of the black people.

In the conversation which follows, the young listeners pose many very different questions. In the course of this questioning, they all reveal a deep respect for the life of Denis Goldberg and a great concern at the social consequences of racial segregation. They ask the visitor about his personal decisions and experiences before the armed struggle, during imprisonment, about his family and his experiences in exile. Some also ask about present-day South Africa, its achievements and mistakes on the long road to freedom and democracy.

Near the end of the meeting Denis Goldberg speaks about his current activity in his homeland: the purpose is on the one hand to review historically the unjust white regime which has now been defeated, and on the other to overcome the deep social rifts and fault lines which still have long-term effects.

Denis Goldberg also emphasizes the necessity of opposing injustice, oppression and discrimination in all its different forms world-wide. He wants to make people sensitive to the universality of human rights and to encourage them to resist in a committed and democratic way everywhere that these are infringed. With his natural authority and authentic personality he is a very convincing proponent of freedom and mutual respect, independent of skin colour, religion or world view, of sex, age or level of education.

Two lesson periods have gone in a flash. Even the bell at the end is more or less ignored. Without prompting the young people give Denis Goldberg a final standing ovation. Many pupils come up to him and thank him, some very movingly, for this very special lesson.

Since this first meeting with Denis Goldberg more than ten years ago, he has regularly visited Siegerland for several days at a time. In our programme of political education for young people and adults on behalf of the Protestant Church of Westphalia, the meetings with him are among the absolute highlights. Meetings with Denis Goldberg are requested by many schools and other educational establishments in and around Siegen. Occasional public evening events or weekend seminars are also organised with him.

Relations of deep friendship have developed since the first meeting with the sixth form teaching staff and the management of the Bertha von Suttner Comprehensive School. The wide-ranging study of Africa, its history, its countries, cultures and developments has long been firmly fixed in the school programme. In this South Africa is a particular focus. Time and again Denis Goldberg gives important stimuli to this, and not only through his regular readings.

In summer 2012 young musicians from Denis Goldberg's home suburb of Hout Bay in Cape Town visited the Bertha von Suttner Comprehensive School in Siegen for several days. They belong to a cultural and musical project which he sponsors for children and young people from all sections of the population and all quarters of the suburb. In Siegen they made music together with German pupils.

They practised several South African and international pieces ranging through folk, pop and jazz. At the end the young people gave a fantastic concert together. Denis Goldberg was present as an honoured guest and ‘secret patron.’ The musicians radiated happiness and showed their musical and artistic talents. The public was enthusiastic and applauded them wildly. The young people from Hout Bay and Siegen hugged each other with pride and a deep fellow feeling.

From all the schools in the region where Denis Goldberg has been a visitor up to now, inquiries come again and again for him to return. He has won many friends in Siegen and Siegerland; friends who are bound to him in respect for his courage and his humanity and with huge gratitude for his tireless involvement.

They congratulate him most heartily, in sincere recognition of his life achievement, on his 80th birthday, and look forward to more meetings in person.

I, too, bow sincerely and honestly before this great man, before this brave fighter for the freedom of South Africa and for the rights of human beings all over the world. I thank him, along with my family, for the gift of being joined in friendship with him, and of being allowed to endlessly learn from him.

Denis Goldberg has built bridges on which countless pupils have been able to walk a path to understanding the freedom struggle. He has built a bridge from South Africa to Siegerland – from Siegerland to South Africa. A bridge built of respect for people, of respect for differences, and of courage to fight against racism – then as now.

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Foto: Hans-Walter Klein who is a teacher at a secondary school in Häusling, Siegen. The door to his classroom.