

Ambassador for Solidarity

22. The Bridge – The Construction of a Humanist

By Peter Senft

“In the twenty-first century we must try to avoid the mistakes of the twentieth century. That’s what I’m working on.” These sentences from Denis Goldberg fascinated me. What weight they have, how simple they sound and how they clarify what pains we must take to make this message a reality.

For me Denis was for years ‘the accused Number 3 in the Rivonia Trial’, a political icon, as one of the heroes of this trial with Nelson Mandela at the head.

When talking about Denis, I must first talk about Edelgard Nkobi-Goldberg. Without her I would never have come so close to Denis, without her I would know little about southern Africa and the struggle against Apartheid. For years Edelgard was “my voice from southern Africa.” So that this can be understandable, I must first mention that for decades I regularly read *Neues Deutschland* – as a West German social-democrat in the Federal Republic of Germany, in the middle of the so-called Cold War. There was a lot in this newspaper which I politically rejected, but for me it was a window into the German Democratic Republic. That was also the reason for my many visits to the GDR. Edelgard reported from southern Africa and formed my picture of another South Africa, a country which did not correspond with what one heard and read about ‘in the Western media,’ or saw on television.

In 2006 I went to South Africa as a diplomat, with my family. A few weeks later, on a short stay in Germany, I met Edelgard in Berlin, as I had several times before. We were guests at a delegate conference of the Berlin SPD. She invited me and my family to Cape Town and shortly afterwards we visited her and Denis in South Africa. During

my first meeting I recognized in this unusual man and communist, primarily a humanist, who had been made into a political activist by circumstances in a system which despised human beings, and who had become an officer in the army of the ANC as a result of the hopelessness of the non-violent resistance to Apartheid, which had been going on for decades. I recognised a pacifist who had fought for freedom with weapons and dynamite.

I will never forget our first meeting at the Mariner's Wharf restaurant at the harbour in Hout Bay. We had never seen each other before and approached each other with a smile and some witty, almost cheeky remarks. A spark leapt across between us. Many before me have felt it: Denis radiates enormous warmth, an open heart and infectious enjoyment of life. In seconds I remembered all that this man had been through and that his worst enemies had not succeeded in breaking him. What a pleasure that I could see that, and what pleasure that we can all experience it to this day.

On that day, and in the few months in 2006 that still remained to Edelgard with her Denis, I could see that she was one of the sources of the strength which made Denis, after so many years of political struggles and sacrifices, into what we know, value and love.

In my time as a diplomat in South Africa, from January 2006 to December 2009, I met Denis very often. I remember our political debates with great respect. With his enormous knowledge, his understanding, his fundamental humanist attitude and his respect for the person he is talking to, he can represent his political standpoint with clear and, where necessary, also sharp argumentation. Often it burst out of him, when he fired back at me – disappointed with the politics of the SPD in Germany – “How can you, with your political understanding and your views, be in this party?” He always listened with interest to my arguments. Less vehemently, but equally often, I criticized him because he viewed the politics of his comrades in the communist parties in South Africa and Germany with too few reservations.

It is important in forming a picture of Denis to understand that the reason for a political argument always was and is his search for a constructive solution. No conversation, no discussion, no action is thinkable with Denis without their being a purpose, an idea, a compromise in order to reach this aim. However, for him, some

principles cannot be compromised: these include human rights and the fight against right wing extremists and fascists.

A diplomat must watch and report, and must not actually intervene politically. That's a challenge for a trade unionist like me. Many of my reports were created with Denis's help, with his tips, his political analysis. At that time in South Africa I managed to make matters more accessible to my colleagues with Denis as an 'honorary diplomat.' In conversations with them years later it became clear to me how strongly he had influenced them as well.

Denis's dedication to his political goals is best described in brief by the way he has involved himself on behalf of children, poor, disadvantaged, ill-treated, sick children, children for whom education ought to create the intellectual basis for an independent, self-determined life.

It is the small, almost inconspicuous expressions which succinctly describe Denis's love for human beings. A few years ago he and I drove by car from the Goldbergs' beautiful home on the hillside down into the valley to Hout Bay, and past a school. The children were rushing noisily onto the street after the end of school. We had to stop the car so that we wouldn't hurt anybody. Denis said with a smile, "I sat in prison for 22 years for these children." Whole volumes could be written about this sentence. Every step in Denis's life is in some way linked with this sentence and yet it does not encompass his whole personality. Denis's grandparents' and parents' path from Lithuania via England in the 19th century to South Africa at the end of the 1920s is linked with the history of a century. The life of Denis's family shows a facet of South Africa which has attracted little attention in Europe: whites not as oppressors of blacks, but as emigrants from Europe, as communists and trade unionists. The Goldbergs took a position, with their political companions, against racial discrimination, oppression and political injustice, without consideration of skin colour, religion or political conviction. This is where we find the basis for Denis's life that he describes in *The Mission*.

Recalling this incomplete account, only one profession springs to mind for a child from this family: bridge builder. Today we could say that Denis achieved the formal qualification as a bridge builder, as a civil engineer at the University of Cape Town. As is true everywhere in the world, however, a formal qualification is not enough to enable a

person to perform outstandingly. The engineer must transform the plans for the construction into reality. However, successful bridge building requires more than that: the traffic that drives up to the bridge and away from it must also be considered. This is also true of a bridge builder who connects people, who connects political ideas. A bridge without access and departure routes is a lifeless construction. Only this image shows the quality that distinguishes Denis Goldberg the bridge builder.

The political history of the twentieth century is a series of breaks in many countries in the world. In South Africa this means a series of breaks out of 300 years of colonialism, out of almost 45 years of bitter Apartheid with unimaginable economic oppression combined with raw violence from the police and the army. It was scarcely imaginable at the time of the Rivonia trial in 1963/64 that things could change.

In South Africa society was divided into white and non-white. In Germany the east-west conflict, a result of two world wars and of the diametric contradictions between two world views, divided the country down the middle and separated German from German. We Germans, having triggered off two world wars, bear a large measure of responsibility for this. With his struggle in South Africa, Denis worked to overcome the division in his own country, but also to overcome the division of Germany.

In both countries, after the end of the separation, courageous people came forward and built bridges from the ruins. Denis Goldberg was and is one of them. The glitter of the so-called economic miracle, which was achieved only by the hard work and sacrifice of many people, the glitter of the reunification of the two German states, which, however, many people in both parts of today's Germany do not experience at all, the glitter of the new South Africa, which can certainly be seen in Johannesburg and Cape Town and in a few more centres, but which has not reached many townships, makes many believe that the bridge-builders have completed their work. At this time Denis gives warning, becoming a teacher for those who are dazzled by the glitter.

This is true in Germany as well. In every part of the country he is valued, respected, loved by many. Denis uses language as a tool. English and Afrikaans, Xhosa and Zulu, and he has even taken the trouble to learn German. Languages are for him instruments for the

smooth flow of thoughts. How much we would miss if Denis could not speak German!

With thorough, tireless, painstaking work Denis, the white South African, builds on the political streets of Germany. He comes as a contemporary witness into school classes, he gives lectures in academies and universities, he discusses with his comrades, he discusses with people who have different political views from his, he speaks with workers, with trade unionists, and he supports art in many forms where art can achieve more than words.

In this way Denis Goldberg, the communist, has discussed with social democrats on many occasions, has made critical comments, sounded out how goals can be reached together, goals which would make the world better to live in and more colourful, because a world without discrimination is more colourful, richer.

General Secretaries of the SPD listen to him equally with ordinary party members. He is believable when he warns that the lessons of the Weimar Republic show that there must be joint support for a democratic state. The conversations with leading social-democrats in the Willy Brandt House and in parliament left a lasting impression on me. It was perfectly obvious that Denis has a vision which goes far beyond day to day political goals. This exchange of views strengthened me in my own political life in putting individual political problems and the frustrations related to them behind me, in seeing the political whole and fighting together against the enemies of democracy.

After the political struggle in South Africa, 22 years' imprisonment, and then enforced exile, a diplomat has developed from Denis Goldberg the civil engineer and member of the High Command of the Spear of the Nation, the armed wing of the ANC. As representative of the ANC at the United Nations his talent was very particularly in demand. He had to lay many foundation stones, one of them in Germany, or more exactly in the Federal Republic. The FRG was being asked to recognize the ANC as a political representation. Not easy, because, in contrast to the GDR, the Federal Republic had had uninterrupted contact with the Apartheid regime.

The critical view of the Federal Republic which was shared by most of his friends in the FRG did not prevent Denis from criticizing the GDR, which he held to be 'the better Germany' after the Second

World War, among comrades, if he thought it was necessary. In quiet moments it made him very sad, not bitter, because Denis can never be bitter.

Staying power, which is needed to build a bridge which can take the load, was necessary to lead the ANC finally to its goal with the election of President Nelson Mandela in 1994. Staying power was also needed to ensure that the Federal Republic would be prepared, at the end of the eighties, to rethink their view of South Africa, for example on the question of economic sanctions. Denis Goldberg played a decisive role in this. He watched the developments in Germany after 1989 with great attention, sometimes with concern, but always with a proper helping of courage and confidence.

I remember an event in the headquarters of the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation in Berlin in 2007. Among the audience of 150 I was the only one who did not belong to the Left Party. To the question from a long-standing political companion as to why thirteen years after the end of Apartheid there was still poverty in South Africa, Denis answered calmly, making the point that the wounds of Apartheid were so deep that people in Europe could not imagine them. He reminded his audience how long it had taken to build up the welfare state in Germany and that after 150 years it had still not been accomplished. Where were the successes of communists and socialists to be felt, particularly in the reunified Germany? What majorities had been achieved in both parts of the country and why were the conservatives so successful? His message was that people should accept change and join in building the future. It was necessary to offer concrete solutions and not be limited to the necessary criticism of what existed. It was very quiet in the room after his contribution.

Today's mutual cooperation in a Germany of the twenty-first century is also his work. This oeuvre is not yet complete. The white South African from the Cape – the most beautiful cape in the world – is an internationalist – as social-democrats, socialists and communists like to call themselves. Mostly, however, they remain trapped in their local or national environment. Denis lives internationalism in front of us; actively lived, this is the basis for non-discrimination.

We, his companions on the road, his political and personal friends, have so much to thank him for. When Denis enters a room, it lights

up. His sparkling eyes make his effervescent mind and his captivating humour visible.

Denis Goldberg the bridge builder will be needed in the future too, in South Africa and in Germany.

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At Mariners Wharf, Hout Bay, Cape Town
Foto Peter Senft Collection