

24. Denis and Osnabruck, the Peace City

“Because it’s always so ‘locker!’”

‘Locker’ means ‘easy going’

By Reinhard Stolle

When I was invited to write a contribution to this commemorative book, questions went through my head: “Where should I begin? And how can I set down on paper in a few sentences the many conversations about bravery and courage of one’s convictions, about grief, humiliation and fear, about our political activities together in South Africa and Osnabruck and also about private matters?” Very difficult! But I will try.

For more than twenty years the Action Centre Third World Osnabrueck (A3W) has been working along with the town of Osnabrueck and terre des hommes (tdh), the children’s charity. Together we set up the Municipal Office for Cooperation and Development with the aim of cooperating in the area of developmental politics. The focus of our public relations work was to be Southern Africa.

In the course of my research on this region, I came upon an article by Hanna Ndlovu in the journal *Afrika Süd* [*Southern Africa*] entitled ‘South Africa, my great love.’ In it she was enlisting support for projects of Community H.E.A.R.T., based in London, which Denis Goldberg had set up. Hanna Ndlovu, in her interview with Denis Goldberg, wanted to know why Europeans in particular, so far away from South Africa, should interest themselves in his projects, in spite of growing poverty and social problems in Europe. Denis replied, “The new South Africa is currently a real hope for the whole world. In a part of the world where only violence ruled for more than 350 years, we are attempting a peaceful transformation. That is why we are appealing with our projects to your hearts, to understand us, to have fellow feeling with us and to support our reconstruction. Not because

Europe should feel guilty, but because it should feel humane.” These warm hearted and optimistic words made me curious about the small, mischievously smiling man with the big horn rimmed spectacles.

At the beginning of 1996 Denis Goldberg came at the invitation of A3W from London to Osnabruck for the first time, to read from Mandela’s autobiography *The Long Walk to Freedom* in the Graf Stauffenberg Grammar School (GSG). The pupils were very excited to be able to get to know a ‘real’ revolutionary and a friend of Nelson Mandela, who looked more like their own granddad than a terrorist. They did know that Denis Goldberg had been in prison for 22 years because of “terrorist” activities and high treason. The pupils hung on his words as he told about his time in prison, about the many acts of harassment by the guards, the separation from his wife Esme and his children Hilary and David, the long years of privation, the time in the high security wing and the many executions which he had to listen to from his cell. At the end of his reading the pupils asked Denis, “Why do you read out of someone else’s book?” And he answered, “Nelson Mandela is my political leader and he has written a fantastic book, and I appear in it.”

Anyone who behaves so honestly and frankly, without any bitterness or desire for revenge, quickly conquers the hearts of his listeners. For the pupils Denis is a living example, not only of resistance to racism and oppression, but also of active solidarity in the struggle for the reconstruction of his country. So no event goes by in which he does not enlist support for Community H.E.A.R.T.

Several years later, in his memoirs Denis wrote about his first reading in GSG. “I was fascinated by the fact that the teachers in the grammar school named after Stauffenberg took his anti-fascist heritage seriously. They gave me their studies on the role of the Gestapo in Osnabruck and showed me the Gardens of Remembrance which commemorate the murdered Jews.”

On the same evening Denis Goldberg spoke before a large audience in the Lagerhalle Cultural Centre. He talked about the period of resistance and his meetings with Nelson Mandela. Again and again he emphasized that his country was on the way to completely overcoming racism, even if it would still take a long time. Racism was firmly anchored in the heads of all the people in South Africa. He gave as an example Nelson Mandela who had once asked himself, on

seeing a black pilot, "But can he really fly?" "Of course he could," said Goldberg, "but it was so deeply fixed in our heads that there was no way he could have such training that even Mandela was brought up short."

At the end of the meeting Denis was asked how he felt about his time in prison and if he did not feel a great hatred towards his tormentors. Denis answered, "I am not embittered; bitterness eats you up from the inside. But sometimes I am infuriated by the misuse of power, the unjust distribution of property and about a state which violates social human rights. But I do not allow myself to be robbed of the joy over our victory and over the prospect of a better future." This lesson in courage to face life had impressed the listeners so deeply that soon after the meeting the first teachers were already asking, "When is this humorous and courageous fighter for human rights coming back to Osnabruck?" That evening was the start of a very intensive reading series, which started 17 years ago and up to now has brought him to our town more than 20 times.

Denis Goldberg awakened my interest in South Africa and the colourful 'dark' continent. The next time I met him was at the Osnabruck Africa Festival in 1997. In the meantime I had visited South Africa and been able to form my own picture. Denis reported on the progress in building a new non-racist society in South Africa, without hiding the fact that there were great difficulties (violence, shortage of work and homes) which were preventing a swift transformation of the country into the Rainbow Nation that Archbishop Desmond Tutu spoke about

Denis was very taken with the activities for peace by the town of Osnabruck. He visited the Felix Nussbaum House, the Erich Maria Remarque Peace Centre and the Augusta Shaft Memorial at Georgsmarien Ironworks. He was especially impressed by the memorial plaque in the Town Hall Square for the Jews, Sinti and Roma murdered by the National Socialists. For Denis it was important to remember the atrocities of the Nazis and to commemorate the victims in order to give them back their stolen human dignity.

At a dinner together with friends, he told about his demanding work for the ANC in London and how happy he was to live with his family again. Next morning he said to me before he left, "I like this town, your hospitality, and I would be happy to come back." In the

following years Denis was a regular guest of the town and came to the Osnabruck Africa Festival every two years.

Since the beginning of 2001 we have concentrated our development cooperation on South Africa and, together with terre des hommes and the Osnabruck Ursula School, supported three schools in the townships of Cape Town. After an exciting trip to South Africa with pupils, the South African partner schools came on a return visit to Osnabruck. The pupils were very surprised to meet their famous fellow countryman Denis Goldberg, who was currently giving lectures in Osnabruck schools.

At that time Denis invited me to visit him and his German wife Edelgard, and in November 2005 I flew to Cape Town. The two were a wonderful 'elderly' married couple and behaved like two teenagers in love. I loved their house in Hout Bay and their considerate hospitality. Denis had been an adviser to the Minister for Water Affairs and Forestry for three years and was often away from home. Mostly he had to get up early in the morning to get the first flight to Johannesburg and only returned late at night on the last flight, totally worn out. So Edelgard and I went on many trips and visited their friends in Cape Town and round about, because now they had a driver, a bodyguard and the best of it was – he even spoke German. Together we visited the Hokisa home for AIDS orphans in Masiphumele, 20 kilometres south of Hout Bay, and were guests at the opening of the Peace House by Archbishop Tutu in the same township. The Osnabruck City Office for Cooperation and Development later extended its solidarity work to Hokisa and expanded it to a further project in which the writer Lutz van Dijk is also involved: the construction of social homes administered by former shack inhabitants themselves. Of course Denis Goldberg is one of the supporters.

On a visit to the Irma Stern Museum in Cape Town, Edelgard told me that she had grown up in the former GDR and had studied journalism there. After the change in Germany, namely, the reunification of East and West, she had lived for a time in Dusseldorf and had written for various specialist journals about southern Africa under the pseudonym of Hanna Ndlovu. So we had 'known' each other for quite a while. The time together with the Goldbergs gave me the chance to have a quite different, deeper and more complex view of the reality of South Africa. Edelgard's radical criticism of the politics

of the ANC – misuse of power, corruption and a misguided HIV/AIDS policy – linked with great empathy with the people, was impressive, and frequently led to heated discussions with her husband, the loyal ANC cadre.

In summer 2006, a few months before a further journey to South Africa, I learned from Denis that Edelgard was very ill and that he was extremely worried about her. But I should come anyway. In Cape Town I visited Edelgard in the hospital and it was clear to me that she was no longer able to win the battle against cancer. During this time I tried as well as possible to support Denis and be at his side. When I had to travel back shortly before Christmas, Denis had brought her back home. She died on 26th December in the hospital.

Denis was alone again. The coming months were very hard for him and he was quite exhausted. Nevertheless, he again made his way to Germany in summer 2007. The organisers of the sixth Osnabruck Africa Festival invited him, under the title ‘Africa in Osnabruck,’ to write an article for *The Magazine for Afro Culture*. In it he commended the efforts of the town to keep thoughts of peace alive and to fill them with content. “The regular Africa cultural events, such as the Africa Festival, which takes place in June, are a further sign that Osnabruck is serious about peace and the recognition of people from different countries, through respect for our culture. (...) The Africa Festival shows me once again that we have the support of the people of Osnabruck, because they share with us the task of making one world out of many nations.”

A few months later, as guest of honour, Denis gave a moving speech on the 25th anniversary of A3W. He reminded patrons and friends with just a word about the essential element in their involvement. As he often does, he jumped back and forward between languages and chose the German version of the expression ‘human dignity.’ The local paper reported next day: “Denis Goldberg (...) certainly spoke to many from the heart when, in his appealing German-English address, he said: ‘It’s always so locker’ here.” Denis stayed several more days in Osnabruck and enjoyed getting the chance to chat to all kinds of people as he strolled through the Market Square. People know him and Goldberg, the ‘world citizen,’ feels at home in Osnabruck.

In the following years the Africa Festival became an ever more important component of Osnabruck's peace culture and Denis Goldberg played a prominent role in that. Through his visits, his good contacts in Germany and South Africa, we were able to extend our educational and solidarity work with South Africa. We in our turn helped Denis in his efforts to support projects like the Ububele psychotherapeutic training centre in Johannesburg, and the Kronendal Music Academy (KMA) in Hout Bay.

In 2010, the year of the football World Cup in South Africa, Denis Goldberg spoke again at the opening ceremony of the Festival: "In bringing cultural forms of expression from Africa to Osnabruck, a central place in northern Germany, we achieve the aim of developing acceptance and respect out of mere tolerance. In our globalized world, which is dominated by stultifying electronic media, Osnabruck recognizes the relevance of cultural diversity." Later Denis introduced his autobiography *The Mission*. Writing this book cost him a great deal of time and effort. For years he could not find the strength and courage to come to grips so intensively with his past, his period in the resistance, his time in prison, his exile and his personal strokes of fate. Now his mission had been fulfilled and with the story of his life, he had at the same time written that of South Africa's long, hard and often painful road to freedom. The reading was a great success.

In the following two years I visited Denis several times in Hout Bay and got to know the KMA better. This was a musical initiative which Denis had supported for some time. In 2007 the music teacher Dwyn Griesel had founded the KMA in Hout Bay, in order, through music and dance, to give young people of all skin colours an opportunity to make music, have fun and bring together the divided society.

In June 2012 the time had come. At the Osnabrueck Africa Festival, the KMA Jazz Band gave their first open air concert in Germany before a large audience. In warm summer weather the musicians enthused the public and the wonderful evening ended with watching football together, this time matches from the European Championship.

In 2011 Denis Goldberg received the Cross of the Federal Order of Merit for his service to human rights and against racism in South Africa and Germany. In his eulogy, the German Ambassador Dieter W.

Haller put it in a nutshell: “Denis Goldberg stands for a deeply felt concept of humanity. He fights for a society in which each person, regardless of the colour of his skin, his religion or class, has the same chances to participate in social life. A society which respects the human dignity of all people and promotes the constructive and productive forces.”

Denis Goldberg has fulfilled his childhood dream. He has become a ‘proper’ bridge builder: One who builds bridges with his humanity. One who cannot give up fighting for a free and democratic South Africa in which all people can live in peace and freedom.

I personally thank you, dear Denis, for your warm-hearted hospitality, your sincerity and solidarity.
For my dear friend and comrade Denis,
Reinhard.

Reinhard Stolle, is the CEO and Education Officer of the Action Centre Third World (A3W) in Osnabruck, Germany. He is a co-organiser of the Osnabruck Africa Festivals and long time friend of Denis Goldberg. He has facilitated several large grants to projects including Ububele; Ukhaya Ngoku and Hokisa in Masiphumelele, Cape Town.



At the Lagerhalle, Osnabruck
Foto Angela von Brill