

## **4. A Marvellous Life! Denis Goldberg, South Africa and the World**

By Eberhard Neugebohrn

Immanuel Kant wrote in 1798 in his work ‘To eternal peace’ (1) that in ‘the community of the peoples of the earth’ matters have developed to the point that ‘infringement of rights in one part of the world [is] felt by all.’ This showed the necessity and topicality of ‘rights of the world citizen.’ The globality and universality of human rights had also been proclaimed nineteen years earlier by the First Continental Congress of the thirteen New England American colonies, and in 1789 the revolutionary French National Assembly had adopted their Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen.

History develops through contradictions and sometimes paradoxes. The American colonies in their Declaration of Independence of 1776 emphasized the inalienable rights of all people, but the condemnation of slavery proposed by Thomas Jefferson, the leading author and a slave owner was removed from the declaration because the slave owning colonies in the south would otherwise not have accepted it. Nevertheless, this declaration of human rights has revealed its historical power, even though it has taken more than 200 years for it to be possible for a person with a black skin to become President of the USA.

The process of world-wide recognition of the universality of human rights was a problem for the regime in South Africa at least by 1948, when the United Nations Charter was adopted. The regime’s policy of racist segregation, exploitation and oppression lost legitimacy internationally. ‘Apartheid’ was the propaganda term which the regime had hit upon to try to get the world at large to believe that it was not a matter of brutal servitude and systematic deprivation of the rights of the non-white majority population in all aspects of life,

but of a 'separate' cultural, social, economic and political development of different 'races.' The expression succeeded in preserving its intended effect until well into the second half of the twentieth century.

### **From the settler colony to the Union of South Africa**

The white settler colony at the Cape had its beginnings in 1652. Jan van Riebeeck, a Dutchman with 90 men, women and children, set up a supply station for the Chartered East India Company. The colony was a very early project of European colonialism. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries it was also 'one of the most rigid and repressive slave-owning societies in history.' (2) The colonists derived their consciousness of 'racial' superiority from, amongst other sources, the Calvinist doctrine of predestination. In 1806 the British conquered the land at the Cape, brought their own settlers in and established their Crown Colony. The history of the Boer and British settlers, characterised by wars, ran its course. The British were liberal compared with the previous colonists. First they banned the slave trade and then in 1838 slavery itself. Most of the roughly 40,000 slaves moved into towns or mission stations, but there they could find little work, and the officials also offered them no land. A lack of alternatives, poverty, debt, alcoholism and a rigorous regulation of work drove many former slaves, within a few years, back to the great farms.

The freeing of the slaves hastened capitalist development. A section of the conservative Boer colonists reacted with a new land seizure and the foundation of new settler states in the north and north-east. The discovery of diamonds and gold in the second half of the nineteenth century gave a new dynamic to development, driven by greed for wealth and by the imperial plans of Great Britain. The bloody Second Boer War of 1899 to 1902 ended this period of South African history with a British victory. In the Peace of Vereeniging the Boers accepted British supremacy, the British accepting in return the internal autonomy of the Boer republics and with that the denial of rights of the African population.

In 1910 the Union of South Africa was created by the formal unification of the two British colonies, Cape Colony, and Natal, and

the two Boer republics of Orange Free State and Transvaal. It had the status of a largely independent dominion. (3)

### **Step by step deprivation of rights and gradual resistance**

In the Union of South Africa the Boer principle of the white supremacist state gained the upper hand. The principle of equality laid down in the constitution was deleted and the deprivation of the rights of the non-white population was increasingly enforced. Motivated by labour conflicts in the mining industry, the white settler parliament in Cape Town passed the Native Labour Relations Act in 1911. This law made it a punishable offence for African workers to breach a labour contract and thus in reality removed the right to strike. In the same year a further law reserved qualified occupations exclusively for white workers.

In 1913 the parliament enacted the Native Land Act. Land ownership by Africans was thereby limited to certain territories which only comprised about seven per cent of the area of the Union of South Africa, later increased to 13 per cent, and by and large corresponded to the Homelands of the later Apartheid period.

Further substantial restrictions followed in the twenties. Africans and most 'Coloureds' were not allowed to undertake training to become skilled workers. The Native Urban Areas Act limited the access of Africans to the towns and created the legal basis for the formation of the townships on the outskirts. Finally, organizations of non-white workers were deprived of their collective rights and from 1924 public employers were only allowed to employ white workers. As a result, among other things, thousands of black workers lost their jobs on the railways. Three years later the (totally white) Union Parliament, through the Immorality Act, made sexual relations between white and black a punishable offence.

As a reaction to the presentation of the Native Land Bill, African intellectuals founded the African National Congress (ANC) in 1912. (4) They protested with letters of complaint and, amongst other things, sent a delegation in 1919 to the Versailles Conference. Premier Jan Smuts, who represented South Africa there, was able, however, to prevent the ANC delegates from gaining a hearing.

Also opposing discrimination against non-whites was the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union (ICU), founded in the same year, a

trade union of Africans and Coloureds which became the biggest trade union in Africa, with more than 100,000 members. (5) However, under the repressive power of the white regime, it collapsed relatively soon afterwards, with organizational inexperience and weakness in the leadership being contributory factors.

Finally, in 1921 the South African Communist Party (SACP) (6) appeared, first as a party of white workers, many of them Jews who had emigrated from Lithuania. When the Chamber of Mines decided in 1922 to relax the race barriers in order to reduce wages, the white workers feared for their privileges and, under the leadership of the Communist Party, went on strike against the decision. Their slogan: 'Workers of all countries, fight for a white South Africa!' This 'Red Rand Revolt' was suppressed by the army on the orders of the government of Premier Jan Smuts. 230 people lost their lives. (7) The Communist Party changed afterwards, within a few years taking a firm anti-racist stance, and was a reliable partner in the struggle against the white racist regime.

The strong involvement of Jewish migrants in the SACP was not by chance. Many of them had learned through experience that solidarity is necessary for a defence against injustice. Under the pressure of anti-semitic persecution, about 40,000 Jews emigrated to South Africa from Eastern Europe in several waves between 1880 and 1910, particularly from Lithuania, where Denis Goldberg's grandparents were also born. Most were quickly assimilated. However, anti-semitic resentment increased noticeably as a section of the Afrikaner nationalists drew ever closer to Nazi ideology. In 1930 Jewish immigration to South Africa was restricted and in 1937, through the Aliens Act against 'non-integratable races' practically banned. (8)

Into this social situation Denis Goldberg was born on 11 April 1933. His grandparents had fled from Lithuania to England in the second half of the nineteenth century from the threat of the East European anti-semitic pogroms. His parents moved with his paternal grandparents to Cape Town at the end of the nineteen twenties as a result of the miserable conditions in the British capital. His mother was a factory worker, his father ran a small transport firm. People of all skin colours and mostly with left-wing political views were regular visitors in Denis Goldberg's parental home. His father worked with

the Communist Party. His old lorry, decorated with banners and flags, drove at the head of the First of May demonstrations for workers' solidarity and against racial separation. Denis Goldberg, still a little boy, sometimes sat on the front mudguard.

On 6 September 1939, three days after Great Britain, South Africa declared war on Germany. Some 335,000 soldiers from South Africa took part in the Second World War, of whom about 120,000 were non-white. 100,000 soldiers were deployed outside the country. Of course racial segregation and unequal treatment operated among the South African soldiers. Only in exceptional cases did the regime dare to arm the non-white soldiers with guns. They were generally deployed on physically strenuous, often dangerous auxiliary services and discriminated against in respect of equipment, clothing, food and pay. (9)

### **Civil disobedience against state injustice**

In 1948 the National Party gained power in the 'whites only' parliament. This meant the victory of that section of South African white society which had openly sympathized with the Nazis during the war.

The new head of government, Daniel Francois Malan, pursued the policy of racial separation with increased vigour. The whole population was divided into four ethnically defined classes: White, Coloured, Asian or Indian, and Black or Natives, later Bantu or African. The classification procedure which each non-white person was subjected to was often extraordinarily crude. To differentiate, for example, between Black and Coloured, the officials stuck a pencil in the subject's hair. If it fell out when the person shook his head, he was Coloured; if it stayed in place, Black. In this fashion whole family groups were torn apart. Many laws and rulings followed to close up the still existing gaps in the Apartheid system. The Group Areas Act of 1950 established the separation of living areas. Blacks had to carry a Pass with a work permit outside the settlement areas to which they had been compulsorily assigned. Non-urban Blacks could only stay in the town for 72 hours from 1952 onwards.

The ANC policy of appeals and protest letters, which had largely been unsuccessful, led in 1949 to a change of generation in the ANC leadership. Still under the principle of non-violent resistance, but with

stronger forms of protest, the organization aimed at a greater public effect and gained support amongst the population.

Denis Goldberg took his final school examination in 1949 and began to study civil engineering at the University of Cape Town. He was involved in the non-racial Modern Youth Society, to which he had been introduced by his later wife Esme. They married in 1954. In this year Denis Goldberg also took his Bachelor of Science in Engineering Degree and began to work for various building companies. He joined the South African Congress of Democrats (COD), an organization of white democrats which worked with the ANC.

Also cooperating with the ANC was the South African Indian Congress (SAIC), which had represented the cause of South Africans of Indian origin. Between 1946 and 1948 about 2,000 of its supporters were arrested after protest actions, which led, among other things, to independent India breaking off trading relations with South Africa. In 1952, exactly 300 years after the arrival of white settlers in South Africa, the ANC, SAIC, and Coloured people began the Defiance Campaign. Many thousands deliberately and publicly defied unjust and discriminatory Apartheid laws during this campaign. About 8,000 activists were arrested, among them Walter Sisulu and Nelson Mandela, who at that time was leader of the ANC Youth League. A year later the campaign was ended.

The state reacted with more stringent repression and no change to the Apartheid laws, but the ANC increased its membership from several thousand to more than 100,000. In 1953 the South African Coloured People Organization was formed as a further alliance partner to the ANC; it was soon renamed Coloured People Congress (CPC). This formation followed on the failure by different organizations of Coloured people to achieve certain political and social advantages over the Blacks through negotiations.

### **‘The People Shall Govern’**

On 26 June 1955 the alliance of the ANC, SAIC, COD and CPC organized a People’s Congress in Kliptown, near Johannesburg, under the slogan ‘Freedom in our Lifetime.’ 3,000 delegates from organizations from the whole of South Africa assembled and agreed the Freedom Charter, which became the central programmatic document of the entire further struggle against Apartheid. Under the

slogan 'The people shall govern' the Charter demanded democracy, equal rights for all inhabitants of South Africa independent of ethnic origin, skin colour or sex, respect for freedom of opinion, assembly and religion, freedom of movement and the right to privacy. It also demanded fair working conditions, social security, living space worthy of a human being, free health care and unlimited access to education and culture. (10)

Denis Goldberg, 22 years old and the father of a five month old daughter, was now working for the South African state owned railway. He was among the organizers of the Congress. In December 1956 the regime arrested 156 activists and leaders of the Congress Alliance, which had organised the Congress of the People, among them Nelson Mandela. In the Treason Trial that followed, they were accused of high treason with reference to the Freedom Charter. Denis Goldberg was sacked by his employer. At the same time he participated actively in a campaign to support the accused. In 1957, the year when his son David was born, Denis Goldberg joined the now banned Communist Party and was pretty well constantly involved in one political meeting after another. The Treason Trial ended only after four long years with the acquittal of all the accused.

In 1959 a radical wing of the ANC under the leadership of Robert Sobukwe split off from the ANC and founded the Pan Africanist Congress of Azania (PAC). The PAC opposed a central element of the Freedom Charter, the declaration that South Africa should be the land of all those who live in it, including the white settlers and their descendants. As a logical result, the PAC also attacked the alliance policies of the ANC in relation to the other Congress organizations which included the democratic white partners. According to the view of the PAC, the liberation of South Africa could only be achieved by the expulsion of white settlers and their descendants. Later some PAC protest banners expressed this view forcefully: 'One settler, one bullet!'

In 1960, independently of each other, the ANC and the PAC started a campaign against the regime's repressive pass laws. At a demonstration of 20,000 people in Sharpeville the police shot 69 demonstrators dead. The Sharpeville massacre marks a decisive turning point in the history of South Africa. The regime banned the ANC and the PAC. South Africa left the British-led Commonwealth

and proclaimed the Republic of South Africa. The government reacted to a strong outflow of capital and the loss of foreign investments by limiting the exchange and export of currency.

The President of the ANC, Chief Albert Luthuli, received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1960, the first African to do so. But at the same time the recognition grew that the totalitarian South African regime would not give in to non-violent resistance. The ANC decided, therefore, on the initiative of Nelson Mandela and others, to found Umkhonto we Sizwe (Spear of the Nation) as the organization of armed struggle. Mandela was arrested in 1962, and almost all of the remaining leadership of Umkhonto we Sizwe were arrested on 11 July 1963 at Liliesleaf Farm in Rivonia, a suburb of Johannesburg. Denis Goldberg was among those arrested. He was a logistics and technical officer of the organization.

Four months later the famous Rivonia trial began. It ended on 12 June 1964 with life sentences for Denis Goldberg, Ahmed Kathrada, Nelson Mandela, Govan Mbeki, Raymond Mhlaba, Andrew Mlangeni, Elias Motsoaledi and Walter Sisulu. Denis Goldberg, the only white person sentenced in the trial, was locked up by the apartheid government in prison in Pretoria. His co-defendants were flown in the night after the announcement of the verdict to the prison on Robben Island off the coast of Cape Town. A new wave of repressive laws almost killed off the resistance.

### **Struggles, Uprisings and Reforms**

The world in southern Africa changed. In 1966 the Namibian liberation movement SWAPO took up the armed struggle against the South African occupation regime. After the Carnation Revolution in Portugal on 25 April 1974, Angola and Mozambique, after liberation struggles with heavy losses, became independent and supported SWAPO and the ANC. In this Cold War confrontation the great political blocs of East and West fought their proxy wars in both countries. The South African regime deliberately fostered rebel groups acceptable to them, which opposed elected socialist governments in their countries. South Africa armed these militias materially and militarily and supported them with 'specialists,' in Angola supporting UNITA, and in Mozambique RENAMO. The Angolan party MPLA

was supported by Cuban troops. In 1975 South Africa also intervened with its own troops in the civil war in Angola.

In the re-invigoration of the resistance movement in the seventies in South Africa, the Black Consciousness movement led by Steve Biko played a particularly prominent role. In 1976, when the Apartheid regime wanted to introduce Afrikaans as the language of instruction in secondary schools for black students, an uprising of young people started in Soweto and then spread to other Black townships. The police in the townships shot about 600 black youths dead. Biko was arrested and died in 1977 as a result of ill-treatment in police custody.

In 1978 Pieter Willem Botha came to power; he 'reformed' the Apartheid system, to divert international pressure, among other things. Certain apartheid laws were toned down or repealed and at the same time the tried and tested policy of divide and rule was further pursued. The Coloureds were to be drawn closer to the regime by means of new privileges and, along with the Indians, be represented in a new three chamber parliament. As a reaction to this further isolation of the black majority, the United Democratic Front (UDF) was formed in 1983. They adopted the eight sentenced in the Rivonia Trial including Denis Goldberg as patrons together with several other leaders. This was a coalition of many organizations, committees from the townships, church groups and women's groups and trade unions. Soon more than 700 organizations with more than a million members belonged to the UDF. They organized strikes, school student protests, tenant boycotts, large demonstrations and the boycott of the three chamber parliament. Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1984, was among its members. The UDF gained a similar importance to the ANC before it was banned. It also had links to the ANC in exile and took the Freedom Charter as its programmatic document. In December 1985 a number of small trade unions united to form the Congress of South African Trade Unions.

In the eighties, however, the persecution of activists by the ever more extended security apparatus increased. Special units of the Intelligence Service and the military conducted planned terror attacks on the accommodation of ANC functionaries who had fled to neighbouring countries. Soldiers occupied many townships,

provocateurs incited different organizations of the black population against each other and sowed the seeds of hate and violence.

### **Ways to Freedom**

Internationally South Africa was becoming more and more isolated. Cultural exchanges and international sporting relations came to a halt. The UNO had contributed to this political isolation with relevant resolutions. The growing international boycott, and of even greater significance the immense costs of wars and military actions in the neighbouring countries and the expenditure on security in the country itself, were causing serious economic difficulties.

In this critical situation, in 1985 the regime offered the political prisoners with life sentences their freedom, on condition that they gave up the armed struggle. Nelson Mandela and the other prisoners from the Rivonia trial rejected the offer. After much thought, Denis Goldberg decided otherwise. He believed he could serve the liberation struggle better outside prison. Apart from that, he was doing rather badly physically and psychologically after 22 years of imprisonment. Nevertheless, he had doubts about his decision; but he believed that the ANC leadership and the other Rivonia prisoners would respect it. In fact there were a number of signals and attempts to take up contact secretly in order to pass on to him just that positive attitude of his comrades. But they did not reach him. Denis Goldberg writes in his autobiography: 'It was time to move things forward. Clearly we were not in a position to defeat Apartheid South Africa militarily. On the other hand, the regime could not extinguish our burning desire for freedom and the abolition of racist Apartheid ... I believed that the time was ripe for negotiations ... I would continue the political struggle in a non-violent way and not allow myself to be imprisoned again ... Above all else, I must not, being set free, be forced to disown our just and armed struggle.' On 28 February 1985, after 7,904 days of imprisonment, Denis Goldberg walked free.

A few weeks later he met Oliver Tambo and the ANC leadership in Lusaka in Zambia; they removed his uncertainty that they agreed with his decision. The ANC leadership decided that he should go to London to his family and there join the Office of the ANC Chief Representative and work for the organization. (11)

In Lusaka Denis Goldberg was also confronted with the question which was just being hotly discussed in the ANC. Should the ANC open up to members of all skin colours? Up till then it had still been an organisation of Black South African exclusively. Coloureds, Indians and Whites had their own Congress organizations. On the other hand, many non-black people worked for the ANC, even in risky illegal functions, for example as couriers. And after all, the future South African society should be free of social and legal inequalities based on skin colour or 'race'. Shortly afterwards the ANC decided to open up to people of all skin colours. With this decision, the most important principle of the Freedom Charter was implemented, at least in the liberation movement.

Hardly anyone else can represent the ethos of living together in a non-racist way, based on the pure principle of the equality of all human beings and the political wisdom of the Charter, better than Denis Goldberg, the only white person among the former Rivonia prisoners, who sat in prison for 22 years of his life for the common struggle against Apartheid. His life is the radical contradiction to the system of Apartheid which despised human beings. But it is also the contradiction to the standpoint of a tiny minority who would like to respond to white exclusion politics with black exclusion politics. And it is also the contradiction to all ideologies and movements which negate the universal validity of human rights.

Dear Denis, it is wonderful that you are living.

(1) Kant, Immanuel, *Zum ewigen Frieden*, Suhrkamp Studienbibliothek 14, Berlin 2011, p33

(2) Iliffe, John: *Geschichte Afrikas*, Munich 1997, p168. The settlers took slaves from 1658 onwards.

(3) In 1926 a committee led by Foreign Minister Lord Balfour made recommendations on the status of the dominions. Thereafter they were united in their common loyalty to the British crown but otherwise autonomous communities with equal rights, 'in no way subordinate to one another in any aspect of their domestic or external affairs'. In 1931 this status was finally confirmed by the British parliament in the Statute of Westminster. With this the Colonial Laws Validity Act of 1865 was formally abolished; this had forbidden colonies to pass laws which differed from British law. See Heinrich August Winkler: *Geschichte des Westens. Die Zeit der Weltkriege 1914 – 1945*, Munich 2011, p475.

(4) The ANC was first called South African Native National Congress.

(5) Iliffe, John, as above, p372.

(6) The name of the SACP at its foundation was Communist Party of South Africa.

- (7) Wilke-Launer, Renate, Winrich Kuehne, in Nohlen, Dieter, Hans Dieter Nuscheler (public): *Handbuch der Dritten Welt*, Vol 5, third edition, Bonn 1993.
- (8) Wikipedia: History of the Jews in South Africa, accessed on 03.02.2013.
- (9) For details see: Recherche International e.V. (public): 'Unsere Opfer zaehlen nicht'. *Die Dritte Welt im Zweiten Weltkrieg*, Berlin 2005, p90f.
- (10) See Appendix: the Freedom Charter explained.
- (11) Schleicher, Hans-Georg: *Suedafrikas Neue Elite. Die Praegung der ANC-Fuehrung durch das Exil*. Hamburg 2004, p250.

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