

Denis Goldberg and the Modern Youth Society.

“Everywhere the youth are singing freedom’s song, freedom’s song.
We are the youth and the world acclaims our song of truth.”

By Z. Pallo Jordan

I first met Denis Goldberg in the Modern Youth Society in the late 1950s. It was an outgrowth of the Modern World Society, a student body on the campus of the University of Cape Town. Left-wing students had formed this body to replace the Students Socialist Party (SSP) after the banning of the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) in terms of the Suppression of Communism Act of 1950. Unlike its campus equivalent, Modern Youth Society (MYS) was open to all young people.

Cape Town was the point of entry to South Africa of the accumulated knowledge, ideas, values and technologies imported from other parts of the world. Cape Town’s history of continuous intercourse with Europe and the rest of the world since the 1490’s had integrated the city into an international community of commerce as a port of call on a significant trade route. Every political, social, intellectual and cultural current in Europe found an echo in Cape Town. The work of the world’s leading progressive playwrights were regularly staged in Cape Town theatres, a proliferation of political clubs and discussion groups - the New Era Fellowship, the Africa Club, the Forum Club, and later, the Modern Youth Society and the Cape Peninsula Students’ Union (CPSU) - debated every topic under the sun. Three weeklies – *The Guardian/New Age*,” associated with the CPSA and the ANC; *The Torch*, associated with the Non-European Unity Movement; and after 1955, *Contact*, founded by Patrick Duncan of the Liberal Party, were published from Cape Town. A host of formal and informal publications of every variety, produced

on mimeograph machines and small printing presses, circulated amongst democratic activists in an intellectually vibrant movement.

The founders of the MYS wanted to create a space where black and white youth could interact as equals in an otherwise extremely segregated society. Its core activities were of course political – the society’s very existence constituted a political action – but it also sought to attract young people through sporting and cultural activities. MYS imparted a host of skills to its members and those who came into its milieu. Youth from the black communities, who might otherwise not have been exposed to them, acquired important and posters, cutting mimeograph stencils.

Apart from the events unfolding inside South Africa itself, Indian Independence (1947), the triumph of the Chinese Revolution (1949), the Korean War (1951-3), the Battle of Dienbienphu (1954), the 20th Congress of the CPSU (1956), the Suez Crisis (1956), the Independence of Ghana (1957) and the launch of the first earth-orbiting satellite (1957) all had an impact. All these were subjects for animated debates and discussions on international affairs. We came to appreciate that the oppressed people of South Africa (organised into bodies like ourselves) were part of a worldwide movement, which was sweeping away the past of colonialism, apartheid and racism. In that spirit the MYS attracted into its ranks students from Namibia, Zimbabwe, Botswana, Lesotho, Kenya as well as visiting students from Europe. Because its primary purpose was political, MYS conducted regular programmes to train its members as public speakers. At the camps and picnics it organised, political debates and discussions could continue late into the night. The articulate and vocal were able to hone their skills while learning from the better read and more experienced members.

The Sharpeville massacre and the smaller scale incident at Langa, on 21st March 1960 were the decisive watershed for the liberation struggle. Though the media and consequently scholarly attention has focused on Sharpeville itself, the African townships in Cape Town were in fact the centres of the confrontation between the apartheid and the African working class that year. The black political formations in the Western Cape were tested as never before during the course of that

year. Personally for Denis Goldberg and his family these events triggered the decision to constitute a military wing of the liberation movement, uMkhonto weSizwe in 1961, which launched Denis Goldberg on the road to Rivonia. As the only White amongst those convicted in the Rivonia Trial, Denis Goldberg will always have a unique place in that story. His autobiography, *The Mission: a life for freedom in South Africa*, offers an insight into an important chapter in the history of our struggle from a different viewpoint because the racist dogmas of apartheid dictated that he would be incarcerated apart from his black comrades and colleagues. That segregation denied him both the companionship and the counsel of his fellow accused. His 22 years of imprisonment was consequently an exceedingly lonely sojourn. But, true to himself and the cause he had espoused from his youth, he bore them with courage and an immense dignity.

I went into exile in 1962 and Denis was sent to prison in 1964. In exile I studied at the University of Wisconsin and subsequently the London School of Economics. It was in London that I re-established links with the Goldberg family. Esme, Denis's wife, their two children, Hilary and David, and Denis's mother, "Granny" Annie Goldberg, had left South Africa on exit permits and become exiles in Britain. Like many others in exile the Goldbergs had to cope with the trials and tribulations of making a life far from home. The family bore the additional burden of having to cope with a father/husband/son imprisoned for life in a racist police state that gave every indication that it would keep him there till he died.

An indefatigable fighter with her own track record in the MYS and the freedom struggle, Esme strove to give her children the best family life possible under the circumstances. A trained physiotherapist, she set up a private practice within a year of her arrival in Britain. She later bought a family home in a comfortable suburb of London and ensured that the two children took full advantage of the limited visiting times the regime allowed their imprisoned father. As a former Londoner, Granny Goldberg found her niche in the local branch of the Communist Party whose weekly meetings she attended until her passing in 1975.

I married a New Yorker, Carolyn Roth, who became fast friends with Esme, an invaluable support for her especially after I was posted to serve first in Angola then in Lusaka, resulting in long absences from family. The mutual support our families gave each other came into its own after our daughter, Nandipha Esther, was born. As our freedom struggle intensified I was required to spend more and more time away from my family. The families of the comrades in prison, whose wives, children and other relatives had to cope without their life companions and fathers had much more to contend with than mine. Despite my long absences, at the insistence of Oliver Tambo, I was afforded the opportunity to visit London at least once a year. The struggle for freedom exacted its price! But I was more fortunate than others.

There was controversy when Denis was released in 1985 before any of the others sentenced in the Rivonia Trial. (18 months before Govan Mbeki; four years before Walter Sisulu and others; last was Nelson Mandela in 1990.) Under the leadership of OR Tambo the ANC adopted the view that Denis was a member of the liberation movement who had served with honour and would be welcomed back into our ranks.

After he was released from prison I met Denis in Lusaka and in London. We used those moments to remind ourselves of our past experiences. I recall telling him about the comrades who attended the training camp he organised at Mamre. Many had become mature, hardworking comrades with fine records in both uMkhonto we Sizwe and in the political work of the ANC. Denis was extremely pleased to know that they had been inspired by that short period of training.

Denis was appointed to be a spokesperson for the ANC in London and in other countries from time to time, doing many interviews on radio and television. He seized every opportunity, often doing five or six interviews per day, in each he employed a fresh set of words to explain our principled position on numerous incidents and situations. I once asked him why he did not consult with us in Lusaka before going on air and he said that the time pressure was so great that one had to seize the opportunities presented or become irrelevant. He went further and said that we at ANC headquarters could issue corrections

if he got it wrong. There was never the need to do that. He also undertook speaking tours in many countries helping to build the international solidarity movement.

I returned to South Africa from Zambia in July 1990 and for a while was not in contact with Denis. The years from 1990 to 1994 saw the realisation of much we had struggled for together. I became the face of the ANC as its principal spokesperson until April 1994, when I was appointed to the first democratic cabinet. Esme passed away in 2000 and Denis returned to South Africa in 2002 to take up the post of Special Adviser to the Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry. He retired in 2006 but is still involved with the youth through a music academy in the neighbourhood of his home in Cape Town. Now the youth can come together freely to sing together.

Today in a democratic South Africa, we are free to occasionally meet and discuss issues and maintain a friendship founded on opposition to racism and exploitation. Much has been achieved to give the people of our country a better life, but so much more still needs to be done to make that freedom truly meaningful.

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In the office of the then
Minister of Arts and Culture
2009
Foto by Thomas Krehwinkel