

9. A story for Denis - an unusual friendship

By Hillary Hamburger

It was on October 6, 2012 that my husband and I were invited to a dinner given in honour of our friend Denis Goldberg. The Randburg ANC Branch renamed their Branch after him. He gave the first annual lecture that was named after him. Denis loves talking, especially about the topic that is never far from his mind - South Africa and our struggle for freedom and our triumph over the dark forces of racism in 1994. We were not disappointed by his hard-hitting lecture

He emphasized the inequality gap between the rich and the poor that remains a scourge in our country. He reminded his comrades that our struggle was against the greedy accumulation of wealth. He talked about the striking miners of Marikana and their exploitative low wages. His audience was riveted and when he was finished, the applause was rousing. The Denis Goldberg ANC branch had heard him.

On the drive home that night from the Walter Sisulu Hall, I reflected on the long journey that Denis had been on and how privileged I felt to have been a witness to a part of it.

I remember that winter's day on the 12 July 1964, sitting in a chilled Pretoria Supreme Court, when the Rivonia Trialists were sentenced to life imprisonment. I knew that I was being a witness to a significant and painful chapter in our country's history. Our courageous leaders held their heads high in the knowledge that even if they were executed the struggle would continue. But the anxiety of a death sentence hung heavily over the entire trial. When life sentences were handed down, a joyous moment swept through the court. We felt assured that while this was a serious setback, it would not stop the eventual triumph of a free society.

I didn't know Denis then, as he smiled and laughed with his comrades, carried away in the relief of the moment. He was only thirty-one years old, with time on his side. I too saw the years ahead through the lens of youth's certainty and optimism. Life's hard lessons were yet to come. Then I had no doubt that they wouldn't serve out their sentences. And while I wasn't wrong, I never imagined just how long it would be. Now forty-eight years later, my memories of those years remain sharp, as they find a place in my story for Denis.

His parents sat in court that day and it was obvious that they were proud of him. They were London born communists, who emigrated to South Africa, where Denis was born. They were horrified by the unjust racially discriminatory structure of the country of adoption, evident long before the Nationalists came to power in 1948. Visitors of all races were guests in their home. It was not surprising that Denis moved into being politically active as a young man. But it was when the ANC went over to armed struggle and he became the weapons supplier that he got into big trouble.

My own mother and father, like most Jews in South Africa, came from Eastern Europe to escape poverty and pogroms. They were honest, decent people who saw South Africa as a place of refuge and were afraid of rocking the political boat. As a young child I asked questions about the way things were in our country. But it was when I became more outspoken about the injustices of our racist government that my parents worried. And when I went to university and found a black friend, they fretted that I would land up in prison. I reassured them that I would be careful.

For all the differences between our backgrounds, I supported the Rivonia trialists wholeheartedly. I considered them all people of immense integrity and courage, who were prepared to sacrifice their lives for the ideal of a free South Africa. I wasn't made of the same metal so I was grateful to them for going to prison, so to speak, on my behalf. True to my promise to my parents, I got involved in things that I thought were safe, although my choice of friends left no doubt of where my sympathies lay. My first husband was a lawyer committed to defending people up on political charges. When Lilliesleaf, a farm in Rivonia was purchased as the headquarters of the underground in 1961, we went to a party there given by Arthur and Hazel Goldreich, with the Wolpes and the Slovos. We didn't know that it was the

headquarters of the “Underground” and we didn’t know as we danced to our favourite kwela township music what devastation was to be wrought by the Rivonia Raid and the arrests there in 1963.

My friend Ivan Schermbrucker told me about Denis when he came out of prison in 1970. He had served his five year sentence alongside Denis in Pretoria Central Prison where he had been sent when the rest of the Rivonia Trialists had gone to Robben Island. I always believed that Denis’s separation from his comrades and their strong community on The Island added to the harshness of his incarceration. Even in prison, apartheid reared its ugly head by separating and dividing people.

Ivan spoke about his concern for Denis whose elderly father Sam Goldberg was his only regular visitor. Esme, his wife, had gone into exile with their two children, Hilary and David. The link with the outside world through visitors was essential for a prisoner’s morale, which the authorities worked hard to destroy. He asked me if I would visit him. I agreed immediately, happy to have an opportunity to demonstrate my support for the struggle. And so began the many Sunday morning treks to Pretoria that marked the beginnings of an unusual friendship that continues to this day.

In those early days we spread the visits among a number of different people. The more variety the better! But then the authorities, quick to make life difficult for political prisoners, decided that only family could visit. I assumed I was promoted to next of kin because I had become more regular than other visitors. I always fetched Sam at his boarding house in Johannesburg and drove him to Pretoria for our combined visits.

As Sam got older and frailer I would pop in to see him in the boarding house where he lived. One winter’s day when I went to visit him, I found him wrapped in a blanket in a room without any heating. He clearly needed to be cared for, if he was to see that winter through. I looked around for suitable places and in the end badgered the Jewish Old Age Home to take him in. They were reluctant because they knew his son was a political prisoner and the Jewish community was almost wholly conservative. Although Sam found no comrades to talk to, he was well taken care of. I was able to keep an eye on him since we lived close by and he would often come for a family meal.

One Sunday morning in 1975, I went to see Sam before I drove out to Pretoria. He was in hospital and not doing very well. Denis had a strong bond with his father and it was a sadness that he could not be with him through this time of his life ending. I think it was in situations like this where prison cut off all normal interactions that Denis talked about the need to grow a protective callous around his heart.

When I got home from Pretoria that day there was a message from the Old Age home to tell me that Sam had died an hour after I left him. I phoned the prison and told the duty officer that I was coming back to give Denis the bad news. He protested that I had already had my visit for the month, and that he would tell Denis himself. I stuck my neck out by telling him that he was being heartless. How would he like to be told by his jailer that his father had died? In a rare moment of compassion he accepted that such news had to be given by a friend. He allowed me to come back.

An hour later, I was back in the visiting section of the prison. Denis was waiting for me behind the glass window, which separated us. He stood solemnly beside the ubiquitous uniformed guard, as if he knew what was coming. When I gave him the news he bowed his head and said that he had been expecting it. The Old Age Home would arrange a Jewish funeral at Westpark cemetery the following day. While Denis would have wanted his father to be cremated and his ashes scattered by his comrades, this wasn't an option as the Home buried their dead according to Jewish ritual and picked up the cost.

Denis, always determined to have his say, held up a copy of Brecht's poem "To Posterity" which he asked me to read at the graveside. The guard gave it to me, as we were not allowed any direct contact. I promised to do that and more. I would round up every communist comrade who knew Sam in Johannesburg to infuse the religious proceedings with their spirit. When the time came for Brecht, I gave the poem to my theatre director friend, Barney Simon, as I thought he would read it with more gravitas.

"We who would have wanted to make a world
where man would no longer be an oppressor to man
a world where man would be kind to man
did not ourselves have time for kindness
but you who come after

when you think of us
think of us with forbearance.”

Denis had had his say.

After Sam died I visited Denis on my own for the next ten years – 30 minutes every 6 weeks. As prison regulations became more relaxed the visits increased to two a month. But apart from that nothing much changed besides the seasons. The long drive from Johannesburg to Pretoria. The clanking of the huge brass knocker on the vast wooden door announced my arrival at the appointed time. I was ushered down long corridors to the visiting section where a pale and thin Denis would be waiting behind a glass partition that revealed no more than the upper part of our bodies. Sometimes there were two vigilant warders, sometimes one, standing beside him, ever alert to see that we didn't discuss “politics” or plan an escape. Perhaps this was fortunate as we focused on personal exchanges.

Denis got to know my family and friends, my study of psychology, my moans and groans about writing a dissertation for a Master's degree, the books I was reading and the music I was listening to. I was friendly towards the prison authorities, presenting myself as a slightly offbeat blond who was interested in psychology and definitely not politics.

I tried to encourage Denis to talk about his feelings. It was obvious that he missed his family keenly. His children were growing up without a father. On a visit to London in the early seventies I went to see his wife. She was a remarkably resilient woman, working extremely hard as a physiotherapist and bringing up the children on her own. She felt abandoned and was angry and unhappy with the sacrifices that she had been forced to make. When I told her that Denis was distressed at not having had any communication from her, she insisted that she had written and that the security police were withholding her letters. I was able to tell him that in my next visit. It was a comfort, albeit a small one.

And so the years went by. Another Christmas, another birthday, another visit. Then I thought I was seeing evidence of a greater weariness in Denis as he grappled with the fact that his life sentence meant life. By the time he had served twenty years he laughed less, his shoulders were more hunched, and there was a creeping deadness in his eyes. On one of my visits he told me with something akin to

despair in his voice that he had said goodbye to 48 comrades who had served their much lesser sentences. While he celebrated their release, the interminability of his sentence was brought into sharp focus. I feared that Denis could die in prison.

It was around that time 1983, that I was able to get an interview with our Minister of Justice, Kobie Coetzee. I had drawn up a memorandum with the help of my lawyer husband, setting out a plea for the parole of political prisoners in general and Denis in particular. I was surprised to be invited to the Union Buildings in Pretoria to discuss my memorandum.

It was a memorable meeting, although initially I was nervous and angry. I expected to find a cold and intransigent man, a representative of the heartless Nationalist government. To my surprise he turned out to be charming. He welcomed me warmly, served me tea and scones, and wanted to hear what I had to say. Our half an hour appointment stretched beyond the hour. I elaborated on the points in the memorandum, emphasizing that they were making a serious mistake by giving criminals parole while refusing it to upright men of conscience.

Many years later Denis said that he had been told that Kobie Coetzee had mentioned to the Israeli Ambassador that he had taken cognizance of what I had said during my visit to him. I find this difficult to believe as there were already intimations that the tide was turning in the country in many ways. A new attitude toward political prisoners was hinted at by offers of conditional release for those sentenced to life. Most political people saw this as an unacceptable compromise with the enemy as there was an implicit demand to turn one's back on the armed struggle.

Denis writes in his autobiography that by the end of 1984 he became aware that there was some talk of his release. He had heard that his daughter Hilary, who lived on a Kibbutz in Israel at the time, was campaigning for his release. I knew nothing of this.

Then one day, out of the blue, I received a strange phone call. A conspiratorial voice on the other end of the line asked if I was Hillary Kuny. Yes, I answered, asking in return to whom I was speaking. "I am Herut Lapid", he announced. I recognized an Israeli accent. His voice dropped a tone as he almost whispered, "I have come to take Denis out and I am told that you are the one to help me". I wondered

if I was being asked to participate in a jailbreak. “Out of where?” I enquired. “Out of prison, came the quick reply. Lapid wanted to see me urgently and gave me an address.

A guard greeted me when I arrived at the house. I was convinced that Mossad, the Israeli secret service, whom I knew to be in cahoots with the apartheid government, had something to do with this. Herut Lapid, a non-descript man, short with slightly greying hair, casually dressed in grey flannels and a white shirt, was waiting for me. As I was ushered into a room by the guard he extended a warm welcome, offered me a chair and began immediately to explain that he went around the world taking Jewish boys out of prison. “Even criminals?” I asked disapprovingly. “Everyone”, he exclaimed as he explained that he needed my help to get Denis to sign a document agreeing not to take up arms again. He had been told that Denis would listen to me.

My head was whirling as I tried to untangle my thoughts. My first hunch was that this was Mossad and the South African government working hand in hand to get rid of Denis. This aroused my anxiety. Then Lapid explained that Hilary Goldberg lived on the same Kibbutz as he did and that they were working together. He had been to London and met Esme who was also working behind the scenes. The South African Government, whom he had approached, was willing to let Denis go if he signed that little piece of paper. He would take him to Israel where he thought he would live happily ever after. The security people had given permission for me to have a face to face contact visit with Denis so that I could talk some sense into his head.

As the picture became clearer I saw an opportunity, not to be missed. If ever there was a time for seizing the day, this was it. Even if Denis signed a document rejecting violence I knew that he would make up his own mind of how to negotiate that duplicitous contract. I thought too that he would never agree to stay on in Israel and that after seeing his daughter he would be off to London and his wife Esme. From there he would report to his ANC comrades for duty. I had no doubt in my mind that Denis would be more effective out of prison than in prison. I agreed with Lapid that prison was no place for “a nice Jewish boy” and promised him my full cooperation.

I was in a state of high anxiety. I knew that any sign of cooperation with the State or anything that could be construed as a sign of a weakening resolve, would be immensely painful for Denis. During

this time there was a knock on the door late at night. Ismael Ayob, a member of an underground ANC cell was bringing a message to tell Denis that he must not sign and must not go to Israel. His cold, stark instruction reinforced my conviction that only Denis could make up his mind. After all he was the one who had spent twenty-two years in prison. And in any case there had been some indication that the comrades on Robben Island would understand his decision to go.

The following day I was driven to Pretoria Central Prison with Lapid for the first contact visit in fourteen years. My memory of our meeting is hazy. I know that I was expecting to be alone in a room with Denis where we could talk privately, even though we would know the room was sure to be bugged. Instead both Lapid and I were ushered into a large room where I seem to think there were other people. Security Branch? Prison or government officials? My speech was going round in my head and I was impatient to get it off my chest. The moment came and I launched into a plea for Denis to sign and go to his family. How he had suffered and sacrificed enough, how sure I was that his comrades would understand. As I talked I kept on blinking, which seemed far safer than winking, to indicate to him that I was putting on a performance.

I don't think that Denis heard a word of what I said. He sat there looking impassive and remote and impervious to my impassioned plea. Lapid looked delighted as he gave me knowing glances of approval. Someone presented Denis with a document, which he signed and it was all over. Soon we were back on the road to Johannesburg. Surprisingly, Denis had prepared himself for such a situation and shortly before his release he had written a letter to president P.W. Botha. (12)

A few days later there was a phone call from the prison to inform me that Denis needed to go shopping to buy things that were necessary for his release. After all those years in prison he had no personal possessions except his books and study notes which would be delivered to my house. Armed with a few thousand rand which my husband and I had put together, I went to fetch him for the strangest shopping expedition imaginable. We were driven in a police car with four prison guards in attendance to a shopping center in Pretoria. I was in a jolly frame of mind to be doing something so normal with Denis. But for Denis the experience was unnerving and exhausting. He

wasn't used to shopping and was happy to get back to the prison where he could rest before the big day of his release.

My family had graciously supported me through all the years of my visits to Pretoria Central Prison. Now, on 28 February 1985. My husband and sons were with me at the airport to say farewell to Denis. That extraordinary occasion was touched by ordinariness as we sat around drinking coffee and chatting for over two hours while we waited for a friend to board his plane.

Denis takes up the story of his rich and eventful years since that time in his autobiography. Now we are two old friends who often reminisce over a cup of coffee. He stays with us when he comes to Johannesburg, often to speak at some ANC function. On one of his visits recently, I drove him to Lilliesleaf, now a museum and the place where our story begins. There is a new exhibit on the Rivonia Trial that we both want to see. While Denis watches a video on Bram Fischer, he weeps. He comments on how strange it is that his memories make him emotional after so many years have passed. I don't think it is strange at all, for although he was in prison for twenty-two of his eighty years, it stands for much more. It is not only a symbol of his sacrifice but also the very meaning of his life.

For all the hardships, Denis is the first one to tell you that he learnt a lot in prison. He studied, grew to love music, became wiser in his understanding of his fellowman and clearer in his political thinking. I laugh as I ask him if he is telling me that he wouldn't have missed the experience for anything. "Not quite," he says with a wry smile.

(12) The letter is reproduced in Denis Goldberg, *The Mission: A life for Freedom in South Africa*, Johannesburg, STE, 2010

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At Johannesburg Airport 28 February 1985
Foto: Hillary Hamburger collection