

8. Denis – Our leader

By Guy Berger

“Don’t worry; you’ve only got a parking ticket.” These were Denis Goldberg’s welcoming remarks to me, delivered with a chortle accompanied by his characteristically beaming face, when I arrived at Pretoria Central Prison in 1981. The previous year, I had been sentenced for seven years, three suspended, after convictions on five charges of political resistance to apartheid.

It had been a stressful ten or so months since my arrest, what with serious sleep deprivation, solitary confinement, trial and more solitary confinement. I had also just been driven some 20 hours from Cape Town’s Pollsmoor Prison to my new place of custody in Pretoria. It was a trip on which I felt too tense to urinate along the way. So, I was not in the best emotional or physical shape. But the “parking ticket” quip, coming from a legend with a life-sentence and already a veteran of 17 years of being locked inside, including years and years of inhumane treatment, meant that any self-pity on my part instantly evaporated.

It was characteristic of Denis that he continued to cheer me up, and to put things in wider perspective, throughout the remainder of my sentence – which was reduced, on appeal, to an effective two years in prison. This was a comrade with an infinite generosity of spirit, and to whom I am ever grateful for the personal time he spent with me in the prison. First, there was his musical encouragement – I was a novice on the recorder, whereas he was an old-hand, and we played a range of duets with him patiently repeating notes when I misplayed. I learnt from him the tune to “the People’s Flag”, and he also taught me the

words to the Internationale. Second, he was always available to debate politics, and he shared freely the historical insights from the courses he was studying, librarianship primarily – something I had not found particularly interesting before hearing his inspirational take on the profession. Denis also commented frankly on my own academic assignments, in the year when the prison authorities formally allowed me to study (they previously refused). He shared his poetry, and we joked over his creativity in making a puppet face from a mango pip. It was not a surprise some 30 years on, to read his autobiography and note the flair in the writing of this master story-teller.

Denis willingly joined with the small band of other political prisoners to help me read newspapers. These had been banned for him and the other political prisoners for most of the period of their captivity, but a concession was made shortly before I was incarcerated. The change in prison policy meant that those individuals with top grades for prison behaviour were now permitted to receive a daily paper. As a newcomer, I had not been in the system sufficiently long to achieve this rank. The warders, however, interpreted the rules in a way according to which I could read my colleagues' newspapers – as long as I did not touch the page. This meant, each day, that I would sit next to one of my peers who was reading, and even if he was finished, he would only turn the page when I indicated that I was done and ready for the next. Once I turned the page myself, when I thought the guards were not looking – only to be pounced upon by an idle junior warder and hauled before the superior officer. Denis helped me deal with the purported “offence”, reassuring me that it was unlikely to produce adverse consequences. True, I received only a warning. And the bureaucratic work-around was able to continue, with Denis and others taking turns at page-turning for me.

Denis was the spokesperson for the group as a whole when it came to negotiating with the prison authorities and visiting politicians or the International Committee of the Red Cross. He always consulted us in advance, and took our views into the engagements. There, we observed how our spokesperson was invariably polite but forceful, and yet without becoming emotional. This was not easy when dealing for example, with the then government Minister Adriaan Vlok (a man

who would later be accused of involvement in police bombings and death squads). Despite the immense anger and revulsion that Denis must have felt in talking to “the enemy” about our conditions and insisting on our demands, he was able to separate this feeling from the need for “professional” dealings with those in power. At the same time, his often-successful exercise of influence derived from his unassailable sincerity and maturity. This was a leader who never resorted to the tempting tactics of guile or flattery. Those who encounter Denis know that he is a person who wears his heart on his sleeve; he has never tried to hide this, even while being a calm and collected realist in negotiating with the representatives of the racist regime.

The result of this style was that Denis was taken seriously, and his arguments were often persuasive. The hatred he had was for racism, rather than for the persons who believed in it and enforced it, some of them with gusto.

Although Denis suffered from periods of terrible headaches and debilitating depression during the relatively short time I was in prison with him, he was unshakeable about the moral righteousness of the actions that had led to his jailing – even though it had incurred enormous personal pain to him and his young family. Unlike the many activists whose later lives, after liberation, saw their commitment come to take second place to self-enrichment and/or the manoeuvring of professional politics, Denis has remained dedicated to the original ideals of the Freedom Charter and to the cause of uplifting the lives of the people at large. For him, political liberation was a means to social emancipation, not the enrichment of a new stratum.

People know Denis for his sense of humour, and his jokes. This is not an unusual trait amongst South Africans who have learnt to cope with trauma by this kind of release of tension. In Denis’ case, however, it is also a reflection of a personality that is intact, healthy, fun-loving and, at heart, happy. This is despite the battering caused to the soul by spending a huge part of his life being locked up in a cage. Probably, it is because of Denis’ ability to enjoy the good side of people that he also cares deeply for suffering. He is, in short, a person who never lost his ability to feel. This is, despite everything, a

fundamentally undamaged human whose heart is open to experiences of both highs and lows of being alive in a struggle that exacts so many tribulations.

One jail experience I had is worth recounting, because it shows the kind of “*mensch*” that Denis is. After 18 months being inside, I reached the prisoner grade status of being entitled to order a long-playing record every second month. As was our custom, the small group of us political prisoners would deliberate on the choices so as to avoid overlap and maximize listening pleasure for all. I explained to my fellow captives that I wanted to buy an LP with South African bird calls, as a counter to the barren and concrete barracks that we were held in. The others, who had lived in cities their whole lives, were not at all enthusiastic at this rustic romanticism. But Denis, who occasionally sprouted dry beans in his cell just for a sense of greenery and growth, spoke out in my favour. So, my order for bird calls proceeded.

Imagine then the embarrassing situation that followed when the LP was played by a warder for all to hear, locked away as we were in our individual cells from 3.30pm to 7am. It was not melodious chirps that came through the loudspeakers. It was lions roaring. Clearly, the record within the apparent birdsong sleeve had been mixed up with another LP in the store. There is a lot of variety you can pack into 45 minutes of birdsong, but not so with the noises of lions.

Later, I managed to get the record swapped for the correct version, and the bird tweets were broadcast to us. They came, however, with a posh-accented announcer who declared the name of each bird before its call, along with the number in “Roberts”, the bible of South African birders. For my remaining time in prison, Denis took great pleasure in our courtyard badminton games of shouting “Roberts 531” each time I whacked the shuttlecock high in the air.

Denis’s courage is not unique, but is no less striking for this. I realized the depth of the sacrifice he made when he told me in prison about the decisions he had made to continue the struggle in Johannesburg, rather than seek safety in exile for him and his young family who were still in Cape Town. He explained how his daughter Hilary had resumed sucking her thumb after his arrest. In such “small”

things, the tragedy of oppression can be measured, and the pain of an imprisoned father can be understood.

This stalwart often told me direct stories from resistance history – such as when he drove out on the Cape Peninsula past Camps Bay, to test explosives by throwing them into the sea from the road. When I met him as a free man in Cape Town in 1991, we drove out to the same spot and I interviewed him for the monthly magazine *New Era* which I was editing at the time. Almost 30 years on, he still remembered the exact place where he had set out on a course that was to divert his youth into day piled onto day, week on week, year on year, without liberty.

One should not miss the chance to write about the links I had with Denis when he lived in the UK with Esme after his release. It had been between 1985 and 1990 that I myself had lived (as an exile) in London, after my ultimate release from prison in 1983. There in the East Finchley borough, I had gotten to know Esme, Hilary and David. I and my own family were regular invitees at Xmas time. Denis made no secret that he found it difficult to deal with some of the figures in the London ANC office, two of whom it later turned out were police agents while others were given to excessive authoritarianism. His high standards were never lowered. And yet he remained supremely loyal to the ideas that the ANC stood for, and for which he had given so much of his life. The same commitment saw him lead Community H.E.A.R.T., a development charity that supported, amongst much else, a project that I initiated when working as an academic in Grahamstown, South Africa. Denis liked the project's mission of giving teenagers in disadvantaged schools a voice through a youth newspaper and the taste of a career in journalism. At least one young teenage woman went on to become a successful journalist on the Sowetan newspaper.

Some years later, in 2000, Denis kindly provided room space to me and my family to visit London while en route to the USA. This gesture meant freeing up a room that otherwise would have been rented out to earn much-needed income from some of the scores of young visitors to the UK who found temporary lodgings in the East Finchley house. When I saw Denis interact with these youngsters as

equals and adults, notwithstanding that most of them were born after he was jailed, I realized that none would ever forget him. With their whole lives ahead of them, probably in all cases as free citizens, they could measure their status against the sacrifices he had made. In an age of much transience and superficiality, they were evidently struck by the wisdom of a man who embodies principles so strongly.

Denis is not a superhero nor an eminent political analyst, even though his ego is sufficiently big to object out loud if he were to read this latter assessment. But his “ordinariness” is what makes him special. He is a bloke (or in South African parlance, an “oke”) with a big heart who saw what was wrong with a society, and who embarked on a course to change it despite the personal risk and the high price he was ultimately forced to pay. He remained constant through all this, and has done so subsequently.

One can only share in Denis’s disappointment that South Africa is not everything that he and so many others had wanted it to be. Yet one can also only rejoice that the country’s biggest problem – apartheid – was resolved. The brave efforts of Denis contributed to this victory. If it is now for subsequent generations to take forward their freedom, they could no better than to do so in a spirit that is a tribute to a man with a giant heart and a passion to end injustice in all spheres of life.

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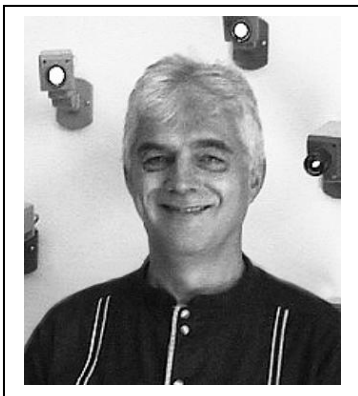


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