

12. “To build solidarity - that was my task”

By Madi Gray

“You come out of prison into this world and you're so open to all these influences and delightful things happen. Sweden was the place for me, the first really big experience. Sweden was so open and friendly and welcoming, so clean, and so wealthy.” (17) Denis Goldberg visited in Sweden shortly after he was released from 22 years in prison. I remember this man who dominated the stage in hall after hall, talking about the struggle against apartheid led by the ANC, mobilising people all over the country.

He was not the first former political prisoner from South Africa to tour Sweden. Both Tim Jenkin and Stephen Lee, South African escapees from Pretoria Central, where white male political prisoners were held, had toured Sweden a few years earlier. He was not the first who had a long and publicly known struggle history. Tebello Motopanyane, one of the leaders of the uprising that began in South Africa on 16th June 1996, toured Sweden from north to south; from Luleå to Lund.

What made Denis stand out was that after 22 years incarceration, which should have stolen most of his youth, he displayed an enthusiasm and curiosity that one associates with men in their late teens and early twenties. As one of the accused in the Rivonia trial, which condemned him together with leaders like Nelson Mandela and Walter Sisulu to life imprisonment, he had an ingrained understanding of the struggle, and he emerged full of energy and determined to do all he could to topple the apartheid regime. “My task was to build solidarity,” he said later.

He spoke with authority and inspired members of his audience to exceed their own expectations of themselves. That showed itself at a

meeting he addressed in Gothenburg: “After my speech a man got up and said, ‘I want to help, but I'm an artist, how can I help?’ I said, ‘We need financial resources, we need this, we need that. I don't know how you can help, but I know everybody can find a way, professionally, individually.’ That member of the audience went away with this idea. With the Royal Academy of Arts, of which he was a member, he organized an art exhibition and artists donated their work. I was there to open the auction in which they sold the artworks in a beautifully renovated harbour gallery in an old warehouse. I didn't know why I had been invited and when I got there he said, ‘It's all your fault! You said we can do something, everybody can, and so we artists have done something.’ They made tens of thousands of Kronor for the ANC struggle.”

Since the 1960s, the anti-apartheid organisations in Scandinavia worked in solidarity with the people of South Africa. The first consumer boycott in Sweden was a reaction to the killing of 69 people (most were shot in the back) during a demonstration outside a police station in Sharpeville on 21st March 1960.

Twenty-five years later, Mozambique, Angola and Zimbabwe were independent countries, though under constant threat from their mighty neighbour. South Africa secretly tried to prevent Mugabe and Zanu from gaining majority power in Zimbabwe. It attempted to destabilise both former Portuguese colonies through low intensity warfare waged by Renamo in Mozambique and Unita in Angola. It organised occasional bombing raids even in relatively peaceful countries like Botswana and Zambia, under the guise of rooting out ANC strongholds.

The Africa Groups of Sweden, AGIS, together with the Isolate South Africa Committee, ISAC, arranged a nation-wide tour for Denis in 1985. The anti-apartheid organisations in Norway, Denmark and Finland also invited him, so that he spent nearly two months touring the Nordic countries. He met members of the radical left, trade unionists, parliamentarians from communists to social democrats and liberals, pre-school children and university students, radical peace organisations and regular church-goers. “What I did try to get organizations in Sweden to do was to try to transcend their differences in the interest of greater solidarity with our liberation movement. It was a dual thing, the support of the Swedish and Nordic governments

was important, but we had to build the solidarity movement with our Swedish friends and comrades to enable the Swedish government to take each step further. If there wasn't this support, Olof Palme would have been isolated. So it is interrelated, as a good lefty I'd say it's a dialectical process."

On many a public platform Denis presented and defended the ANC. "We always said there were four pillars to our struggle: the underground struggle, the open political struggle, the international solidarity movement, and our armed struggle. The solidarity movement was very important. It is widely acknowledged that the isolation of the apartheid regime was significant in our liberation."

In an interview Denis explained his own development towards armed struggle. "In the 1950s I joined the Congress of Democrats and the Communist Party underground. In the 1960s I joined Umkhonto we Sizwe (Spear of the Nation, which many commentators call the ANC army) as Technical Officer. I was a trained engineer and you needed trained people. So I became a weapons maker. We chose not to use explosives in Cape Town, but to do cold sabotage. Throw a rope over a huge bunch of telephone lines and pull them down and the whole of Somerset West and the Strand and Gordons Bay had no telephones. Or our MK people dug up a cable and put a pick axe to it, so all the telephones along the coast were dead. The telecoms people could come and fix it up, but the point was the security forces had to stop this happening. We had no military instructors and had to learn for ourselves, so why make an explosion or compel the cops to go all out looking for you? You learn slowly how to reconnoiter a target, how to advance and how to retreat, and be safe."

Many people in the Nordic countries have moral difficulties with the issue of an armed struggle. When does it become terrorism? When is it a justified struggle? "My point is that whichever of the Scandinavian countries I visited, there was a welcoming, even with the difficulties people had of supporting the armed struggle. That a liberation movement had such international support from relatively small countries, the Nordic countries, was on a scale that was astonishing." For example there was the ANC Conference on Childrens' Rights that was very effective. It took place in Harare but the support came from the Swedish organization 'Save the Children'

and UNICEF.” Lisbet Palme, Olof Palme’s widow, was one of the opening speakers.

“There were Swedish academics who played an important role in gathering information and analysing it and presenting it so that we in South Africa's liberation movement, the ANC and its allies, and Swedish people and other people around the world could understand. It helped us and gave us intellectual ammunition. It helped tremendously to have this intellectual support because, if in an intellectual argument you can detach people who support apartheid from that position, you strengthen yourself relative to the regime and its supporters. In the end, unless we are operating on blind prejudice and bigotry, if you are operating at some level of intellectual conviction, you are open to debate and argument. There was a need to present a rational argument about our common future about why there shouldn't be racism.”

One of the reasons that Denis became a popular speaker was the openness of his response to questions about his personal life in prison. “So many people do speak English that I was able to communicate with Swedes. I remember at one of these universities, where I was very open with people. I said you can ask any question you like and I'll choose whether I'll answer it. You're free to ask, I'm free to decide whether to answer. I gave my talk and sat down. Everybody was terribly curious, what does a man in his forties, who spent 22 years in prison, do with his sex life? One young woman asked, “What do you do for sex in prison?” and totally unembarrassed I talked about it.”

At times Denis was specially invited to address a conference, for example: “There was Konsum, the cooperative movement, which held a regional conference in Smedjebacken in Dalarna. I remember being asked ‘Why are people racist?’ I said, ‘Perhaps it is built into our language and into our belief systems. We couple these things in our minds, ending up with fear of the strange, fear of those who look different, perhaps fear of people with dark skins, who speak different languages, with national chauvinism.’ I ended up with them shouting slogans like it was the 1960s all over again and they were enjoying being engaged with this movement.

“Solidarity wasn't a one-way street. There was the need to deal with the distaste of many Scandinavian people for the Laplanders. Whether in Norway or Sweden people who'd been involved in the

anti-apartheid movement told me, ‘We are fighting racism in South Africa, but we suppress the language of the Sami people in the north. If somebody wants to build a hydroelectric power dam, you suddenly find articles in newspapers saying these are lazy people, they let their women do the work and the men herd the reindeer.’ Then you say, ‘But this could be South Africa that you are talking about.’ It was Swedish people involved in anti-apartheid who held up the mirror of the racism of South Africa to their own societies in Scandinavia, saying, ‘That’s hypocrisy.’ That is the kind of intellectual argument I am talking about. They took a stand against their own racism in their own society. So yes, there was support for our struggle, but we gave something back.”

An important contribution spearheaded by Denis was branding the ANC and Nelson Mandela. In the ANC office in London in 1985 he says that he noticed that the ANC was selling all kinds of memorabilia from the anti-apartheid movement. But there were no scarves, caps or T-shirts with the ANC logo or in the ANC colours. He proposed that the ANC should have its existence separately from the Anti Apartheid Movement and proposed a marketing operation. Soon there were coffee mugs and coasters, t-shirts and scarves and skullcaps and badges and children's t-shirts and watches and very elegant diaries. There were many willing buyers who were advertising the ANC out of choice and doing our work for us

In 1990, eight leaders of the ANC, who’d been released shortly before, came to visit the ANC president, Oliver Tambo, who was recovering from a stroke in Erstagårdskliniken, outside Stockholm. While the leaders were in Sweden, on 2 February, the South African President, WA de Klerk, announced the unbanning of the ANC and 32 other organisations. Nelson Mandela was released less than two weeks later, on February 11. Within a month, he too, visited Stockholm. There he met with ANC members from throughout the northern hemisphere and filled a huge indoor stadium with Swedes and other ANC supporters from far and wide.

“One of the things I did when Nelson Mandela came to Sweden with all the leaders was to give them each a great big golden yellow shopping bag with the ANC’s Umkontho fighting spearman on it. Into each I had packed t-shirts for adults and children, scarves and watches. I’ve got photographs of Nelson Mandela wearing our scarf and our

sweatshirt and people had flags. I wanted them to fly home and walk off the plane in South Africa with the ANC shirts and their goodies. Instead of a duty free bag, they'd carry an ANC bag, before the ANC was fully accepted, before it was okay to do this. It was after the releases, but before the ANC had re-established itself."

Denis returned to Sweden and the other Scandinavian countries several times. After 1990 he was invited to speak on other platforms as well at meetings organised by the broader solidarity movement. "To defend human rights is old, and we can't submit to the demand not to defend human rights. We need to isolate regimes, we need to isolate Morocco so that the people of Western Sahara, the Saharawi people, can have their own country. We need to support the Palestinian people, though I do not like some of their leaders, but I know about their oppression, the theft of their water, their olive trees, and their land. People react, and they need our support. It's not terrorism to support the Palestinian people."

Denis has not been back to the Nordic countries recently, but says, "The connections still remain and I know that if I were in Sweden and were to look up some of the people, the friendships would be there."

Madi Gray has spent a large part of her life educating people about Apartheid, as journalist, publisher, translator and lecturer in Sweden. At present she works as travel leader for Swedish visitors to South Africa, showing them the natural beauty of the land as well as the progress and triumphs of the people of South Africa.

(17) The quotations in this contribution are from an interview the writer conducted with Denis Goldberg in 2005 for the Nordic Africa Institute (Uppsala). See <http://www.liberationafrica.se/intervstories/interviews/goldberg>



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