

28. Denis Goldberg: Rivonia Trial's 'Baby' turns 80

By Ryland Fisher

The selflessness of Denis Goldberg, even in celebrating his birthday, is a reminder that the struggle against Apartheid was never about personal enrichment or entitlement, but always about improving the lives of the majority of South Africans.

On Saturday night, I was privileged to be among a reasonably small group of people, including many from overseas, who gathered in Hout Bay, Cape Town, to celebrate the 80th birthday of Denis Goldberg, who was sentenced to life imprisonment in the Rivonia Trial in 1964. He served 22 years in prison before being released in 1985.

For someone who had sacrificed so much so that South Africans could eventually gain their freedom, the event was relatively low-key with no celebrities, big businessmen or high-ranking politicians present. The only politicians I observed were former minister of Arts and Culture Dr Pallo Jordan and ANC MP Ben Turok.

While the occasion was meant to celebrate Goldberg's special day (his birthday was on Thursday 11 April), it was more about the Kronendal Music Academy, of which he is a patron, and included several performances by students of the academy.

The students showed what can happen in a divided suburb like Hout Bay if people set their differences aside to work together. Hout Bay is a unique suburb in Cape Town because one has to cross a mountain to gain access to it. But the suburb is also racially divided, with the village and the valley being mainly white and rich, with Hangberg being mainly coloured and Imizamo Yethu being mainly

African. The academy's jazz band has already travelled to Germany, a trip made possible by Goldberg's close association with that country, and two students from "shanty town in Hout Bay" (Goldberg's words) have been accepted to study music at the University of Cape Town.

Goldberg, in a very short speech which was surprisingly devoid of politics, said he made no apology for turning his birthday party into a fundraiser for the academy. He had asked all guests, instead of birthday gifts, to make donations to the academy. On Saturday night, he announced that the 150 or so guests had donated about R70 000 to the academy, enough to pay the salaries of a few music teachers.

"When I was a small boy, I was given socks and hankies and now I have too many! So please, no personal gifts, make a donation to KMA instead," he wrote in his invitation.

The Rivonia Trial started in November 1963 and ended in June 1964, when Goldberg was sentenced to life imprisonment with seven others senior ANC leaders, including Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu and Govan Mbeki. Apart from Mandela and Goldberg, the only surviving Rivonia trialists are Ahmed Kathrada and Andrew Mlangeni.

Kathrada sent an email to Goldberg, apologising for not being able to attend his birthday party and pointed out that, at 80, he still remained the "baby" of the Rivonia trialists.

The selflessness of Goldberg, who gladly played second fiddle at his party to the young students of the music academy, displayed a characteristic that is sadly become almost non-existent in our society today.

He chose to spend his birthday party – others will still be held in Germany and London later this month – with close friends and people associated to the projects that he now promotes, such as the music academy and a psychiatric practice in Gauteng. He chose to promote these projects instead of focusing on his own achievements.

Speeches were not made by political associates, but rather people who have been involved with Goldberg as friends over the years, including Hillary Hamburger, who (was his prison visitor for many years, Tina Jerman who – *added by editors*) has been helping to organise lecture tours for him in Europe, and Lynn Carneson, who

spoke about how her dad, Fred Carneson, had recruited Goldberg to the SA Communist Party. Fred had been the General Secretary of the SACP and an editor of the original *New Age* newspaper.

Goldberg's contribution to the struggle was acknowledged in a special 40-page publication containing articles written by people who had been influenced by him over the years. They included South Africa's ambassador to Germany, Makhenkesi Stofile, SACP deputy general secretary and Deputy Minister of Transport, Jeremy Cronin, and former Rhodes University journalism professor, Guy Berger, who had been imprisoned with Goldberg at Pretoria Central Prison, where white political prisoners were sent under Apartheid, while their black counterparts were sent to Robben Island.

I could not help thinking on Saturday night that the ANC and the government had missed an opportunity to pay proper tribute to someone who had made a huge contribution to the struggle which was led by the party when it was still a liberation movement.

We are almost 20 years into our democracy, but already there is a generation of young people who are not aware of the sacrifices made by people such as Goldberg so that they can enjoy the freedoms they enjoy today.

South Africans have very short memories and that is why it is necessary for us to record the stories of people such as Goldberg and the other Rivonia trialists, along with the thousands of people who supported the struggle throughout the years.

The best way to pay tribute to someone such as Goldberg is to make sure that his legacy lives on way beyond his 80th birthday. Young people need to revisit what drove people such as Goldberg to sacrifice in the way they did, without any guarantee that we would one day achieve our freedom.

Goldberg and others like him were driven by a desire to see a non-racial, non-sexist and more equitable society, something that we still have not achieved and will probably not achieve for a long time.

Our leaders need to continuously recommit themselves to these goals and remind themselves that the struggle was never about personal enrichment and entitlement. It was always meant to be about improving the lives of the majority of South Africans.

It will be a pity if we lose the commitment to these ideals as we lose people such as Goldberg, as we inevitably will.

Happy birthday Denis Goldberg. I hope when I turn 80, I will be able to reflect on a life lived even half as well as yours.

[First published online in Daily Maverick 14 April 2013. Reproduced by kind permission of the author.]

Ryland Fisher was Editor of the *Cape Times* and *The New Age* and an assistant editor at the Sunday Times. Fisher is the author of *Race* (published 2007), a book dealing with some of the issues related to race and racism in post-apartheid South Africa. His first book, *Making the Media Work for You* (2002), provided insights into the media industry in South Africa. He is executive chairperson of the Cape Town Festival, which he initiated while editor of the Cape Times in 1999 as part of the One City Many Cultures project. Fisher is the editor of a major new book on Nelson Mandela and the consulting editor of a book on South Africa's first 20 years of democracy. He also runs a consultancy focusing on media and social cohesion.

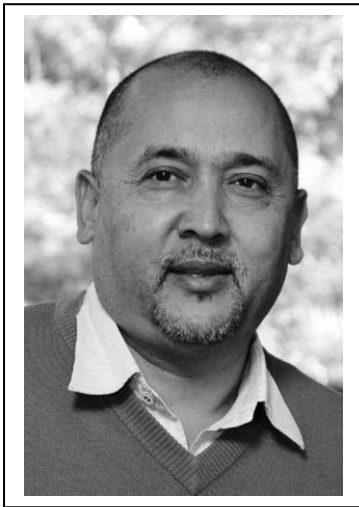


Foto: Ryland Fisher collection