

Vice Chancellor, I have the honour to present, for the award of the degree of Doctor of Science in Engineering, honoris causa, Denis Theodore Goldberg.

There were 10 accused in the Rivonia Trial. The charges included: “recruiting for the purpose of violent revolution and committing acts of sabotage⁽¹⁾. The penalty - was death. Accused #1 was Nelson Mandela; #2 was Walter Sisulu and #3, and the youngest, was Denis Goldberg, the man who stands before you today.

From his autobiography: “The day for sentencing in the Rivonia Trial in Pretoria was 12 June 1964.... I was 31 years old.... The prosecution wanted the maximum sentence – and we expected it: death. But, in a short statement to the court, ... the judge imposed a sentence of life imprisonment. As he spoke, I watched the faces of my comrades light up with the most wonderful smiles of joy and relief. We laughed out loud, overjoyed to live, even though it would mean life behind bars. (My mother was in court) and in the commotion could not hear what the judge had said. She called out, ‘What is it?’ and I replied, ‘Life! Life is wonderful!’”

I was 31 years old. I would spend altogether twenty two years in prison.⁽²⁾

Denis Theodore Goldberg was born in Cape Town in 1933, went to Observatory Boys School, and studied Civil Engineering at UCT. Highlights - and low lights - of his time at UCT include being only 16 when he started his studies, and therefore always being the youngest (and smallest in the rugby team). He managed the unusual feat of failing applied maths but passing pure maths – two years in a row. He was also painfully aware that “not one black student studied engineering at the so-called “open” University of Cape Town in [his] time”(2).

It was the deliciously cooked roast lamb with garlic and potatoes that led him to a new and very distracting girlfriend, Esmé, and it was Esmé that led Denis to become involved in the non-racial Modern Youth Society. He organised meetings and political discussions, dropped leaflets, and spent weekends organising non-racial youth camps. Denis was also part of the organising committee for the Congress of the People that culminated in the writing of the Freedom Charter, a document that is embedded in the South African Constitution. (Esmé and Denis soon married and had two children, Hillary and David.)

Throughout his activist years, he also worked as a Civil Engineer. He was first involved in building the Athlone power station and then, after he was fired from that job (for political agitation), he also designed a road that ran through Wingfield military airport. He wasn’t very impressed with the security arrangements at Wingfield and, in typical Denis fashion, did not hesitate to let them know.

His first experience of prison was actually in 1960. It was after the Sharpeville massacre and a State of Emergency had been declared. There was a nation-wide call to stay at home. Denis, wanting to provide food to support the strikers, was detained. He was 27 and he spent four months in detention without trial.

Three years later, and at this stage a member of Mkhonto WeSizwe (MK), Denis was arrested at Liliesleaf Farm in Rivonia and became accused #3 in the Treason Trial.

He never practised again as an engineer. Just 8 years after his graduation in this very hall, he was standing in the dock at the Palace of Justice in Pretoria, waiting to hear that he had received the death sentence. That was followed by 22 long years in Pretoria Central, separated from the rest of his comrades – Mandela and Sisulu since he was the only white convict. Towards the end of his sentence, he was overseen by warders who had not yet been born at the time of his first imprisonment⁽²⁾.

For many years, bed was a mat on a hard floor and breakfast was a bowl of gruel but he read 300 books in his first year of prison⁽³⁾, taught himself German, although he would not hear it spoken until many years later⁽⁴⁾ earned three degrees, and was the go-to person for warders who were studying⁽⁵⁾. He maintained, not

only his sharp mind, but also his wry sense of humour. When Jeremy Cronin arrived at Pretoria Central to serve his seven-year sentence, Denis greeted him with: “Don’t worry; you’ve only got a parking ticket. You’ll hardly be here long enough to dirty the dishes.”⁽⁵⁾

Denis Goldberg was released in 1985 and went into exile, working for the London Mission of the ANC. He now lives in Hout Bay where his house is floor-to-ceiling art. Every spot on every wall is chock-full with colour and creativity. There are paintings and sculptures and banners and bookcases full of books. A massive window in his lounge overlooks the mountains across the bay. The unrestricted view is a daily reminder that is not only no longer behind bars⁽⁶⁾, but that he can look out at the landscape and into his wonderful life beyond.

Part of that is fulfilling a dream through the Denis Goldberg House of Hope, an arts, cultural and educational centre. It is a place where children from Imizamo Yethu and Hangklip can get together and learn music, Language, Life Orientation, IT Skills and Performing Arts⁽⁴⁾.

The man who stands before you has an unfailing passion for Life. He has given selflessly for the ideals of justice and equality; he is known for his bravery, intellect and sense of humour and he is also a man who is filled with compassion and hope⁽⁷⁾.

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