

Arthur Goldreich 1929 – 2011

An appreciation by Denis Goldberg

I have read many obituaries on the internet about Arthur Goldreich. Some of what follows is well known, but I have added details that others have not talked about, mostly from personal contact with him.

When I met Arthur in May 1963 he appeared to be a well off, handsome, strongly built man in his thirties with a certain self confident swagger. He liked to wear jodhpurs and riding boots with a well fitting tweed jacket and open weave riding gloves with leather palms and fingers, all colour coordinated in shades of brown and tan. He drove what was then a seemingly exotic Citroen DS19 car with an *avant garde* shape. He was a designer for one of the large department chain stores. He was also a prize winning artist and dressed the part. He had designed and constructed the sets of the hit South African musical King Kong. That was in itself an indicator of his character for it was a theatre piece with story, music and lyrics written by black South Africans about black South Africans at a time of ever deepening apartheid repression. His social contacts were with musicians, artists and performers. He was consciously opposed to the apartheid policies of the time.

In part, I believe his opposition was shaped by growing up in Pietersburg (now Polokwane) in the then Northern Transvaal (now Limpopo Province) near to an asbestos mine and his family being of Jewish origin faced open anti-Semitism from the predominantly Afrikaner mining and farming community. Experience of discrimination can make one oppose the dominant forms of discrimination even though the majority of whites simply went along with apartheid racism and benefited from it.

Arthur told me he had been a soldier in the Palmach and fought against Arabs and Palestinians for the independence of the State of Israel, newly formed by UN resolution as a way to compensate European Jews for the decimation of the holocaust. He learnt soldiering during that time but like so many Jews of left wing political persuasion came to oppose the militaristic oppression of the Arab and Palestinian people by the Zionist state. All of this helped to shape his active opposition to apartheid.

In later life, while living in Israel he became a vocal founder member of the anti apartheid movement opposed to Israel's pro-apartheid South Africa policy. He also became vocal in his opposition to the Israeli repression of the Palestinian people. He insisted that architecture, the design and building of illegal fortress-like Jewish settlements on Palestinian land was itself not abstract design, but fundamentally political. He railed against this trying to get his students at the Bezalel Design Institute to understand their role in the oppression.

My personal connection to Arthur started in May 1963 when Joe Slovo, Central Committee Member of the South African Communist Party as I then (correctly) assumed, and a co-founder with Nelson Mandela of Umkhonto we Sizwe introduced me to Arthur who lived with his wife Hazel and two sons Nicholas and Paul on a large small holding called Liliesleaf Farm on the outskirts of Johannesburg in the semirural area of Rivonia. The house and 28 acres (12 hectares) of grounds were for their time palatial, or at least like a country manor.

Though the outbuildings were somewhat dilapidated, the lawns around the manor house were beautifully manicured. The rooms were large with hardwood parquet floors and the Goldreich family maintained the façade beautifully. They appeared to be part of the huntin', ridin', and shootin' set. Clearly nothing untoward appeared to be happening there. Behind the façade however, everything was not as it seemed to be. The property was in fact owned by the SACP through a front company and was used as the underground headquarters of the SACP. One of the outbuildings had been the home of one 'David Matsumayi' in reality Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela, who posed as a farm worker and 'house boy.' The whole family was at risk for sheltering the Black Pimpernel as he was known in the media at that time. To the Security Police he was the 'most wanted person', and like Alexander Dumas' Scarlet Pimpernel it was said: "they seek him here, they seek him there, they seek him everywhere."

When I realised that Liliesleaf was also the underground headquarters of the African National Congress and UmKhonto we Sizwe, the Spear of the Nation, the growing armed wing of the liberation movement, I admired the courage and commitment of Arthur and Hazel even more for they were sitting on a barrel of dynamite that could destroy their lives and those of their children if the security police should discover where we were hiding out - Ahmed Kathrada, Walter Sisulu, Govan Mbeki, Raymond Mhlaba, Wilton Mquayi, and me too. But in addition Bram Fischer, the famous advocate, Joe Slovo also an advocate, Bob Hepple an academic lawyer, Rusty Bernstein and others would arrive there for meetings of their various organisational committees.

Arthur was the convenor of our Logistics Committee of the High Command and he passed to me the designs for home made military weapons such as hand grenades and landmines he had brought back from China where he had been sent by the MK leadership.

Arthur designed and executed my disguise which turned me into a rather rabbinical looking character with small wire rimmed glasses and a full beard. He disguised Ahmed Kathrada rather well using his swarthy skin and hair bleached to make him look quite different on casual inspection. Arthur revelled in the clandestine activity. Indeed we all did, feeling we were on the verge of momentous events when we would overthrow the apartheid state.

Our security was seriously compromised by the number of openly politically active comrades who visited Liliesleaf Farm. I was instructed to buy a new small holding at Travallyn Agricultural Holdings in Krugersdorp and we moved there leaving Arthur and his family and Ahmed Kathrada behind. Because a new alternative secure venue had not yet been found, one last meeting of the MK High Command was to take place on 11 July 1963 in the afternoon. The meeting started and then the Security Police raided the farm arresting all of us, including Arthur and Hazel when they returned home from work. Under 90 days detention the police interrogators sought to turn Hazel against Arthur and the movement by showing her love letters to him from a lover. He had kept them in his desk at work. She resisted the police. Arthur and Harold Wolpe were detained in police cells at Marshall Square where Mosie Moolla and Abdulhay (Charlie) Jassat were also detained and they successfully bribed a young policeman to allow the four of them to escape. As it happens, Hazel was also detained there and so was my wife.

My story is of Arthur, and he and Harold escaped from the prison in the evening and found that their getaway car was not awaiting them. They walked towards Hillbrow in the dark and by chance the famous theatre director Barney Simon happened to stop at a traffic light near them. Arthur persuaded him to drive them to safety. He took them to his own flat and at their suggestion went off to Denis and Hillary Kuny, waking them up at two in the morning to ask for help. Denis asked their neighbour Ivan Schermbrucker, a leading communist activist, for help to hide them. In the meantime Hillary made a packet of sandwiches for Barney to take back home for the escapees instructing Barney to make coffee for them. Hillary told me that Ivan took over and Arthur and Harold were taken into hiding. They spent a short time in the garden cottage of Leon and Maureen Kreel in Mountain View where they were disguised as priests in long cassocks and driven to Swaziland by Ted Fram where they crossed the border on foot. I believe they were given asylum by the Rev Hooper until a chartered flight took them to Botswana where, for their safety, the British colonial authorities locked them up in a prison. Charlie Jassat and Mosie Moolla also successfully escaped but because of the nature of our media with its biases, their key role in the escape has always been neglected.

In Botswana, a plane sent from Tanzania by President Nyerere to fetch them was blown up on the runway by South African agents. The threat to Arthur and Harold was very real. After several attempts a second plane was chartered and they were flown to Dar es Salaam with other South African political refugees.

Arthur and Hazel were divorced and Arthur moved to Israel where he became a Professor of Design and Architecture. I referred earlier to Arthur's stand against the Israeli oppression and domination of the Middle East in alliance mainly with the USA but the Western powers in general. At the time of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 in which the notorious massacres took place in the Sabra and Shatilla refugee camps, Arthur led a mutiny by several reserve officers of the Israeli Defence Force who refused to participate in the invasion. They could have been tried by a military court but the authorities did not prosecute them. The additional publicity would have done the military even more harm. Arthur was consistent in his opposition to racism and oppression whether in South Africa or Israel or elsewhere.

My personal contact with Arthur was renewed when I was released from prison in 1985 and went to Israel to visit my daughter who lived on a kibbutz at that time. On arriving in Israel I was driven away from the airport and found myself at Arthur's home in Herzliya, near Tel Aviv. On arrival he remarked with pride that the last house I had been in when we were arrested was his home, and the first house I was entering after my release was also his home. I responded with a question: Is it safe this time?

I had sporadic contact with Arthur thereafter. One notable event was in Helsinki at a meeting of anti apartheid movements organised by the Cairo based Afro Asian Peoples Solidarity Organisation. Arthur represented the Israeli AAM and I spoke for the ANC and also as an independent expert. He made a brilliant speech and most delegates said that he and I made the politics of oppression easy to understand and set out logical steps to destroy it. Of course, we had the solid policies of our liberation movement to rely upon and our own years of experience.

Other contacts followed through the mutual support we gave to the antiapartheid movements. My last real contact with Arthur was at Liliesleaf Farm in December 2001, when then President Mbeki launched the Liliesleaf Trust which was given the task of turning the farm into a museum to the determination of committed freedom fighters to achieve the end of apartheid and the building of a democratic, non racist, non-sexist state. The Trust and its Liliesleaf Museum has a distinguished board to back up the dedicated and highly successful work of Nicholas Wolpe, the son of the late Harold Wolpe, Arthur's comrade in politics and in arms.

I enjoyed knowing Arthur, a larger than life character who was a marvellous raconteur. Sometimes one wondered if there was a touch of poetic licence in his telling of essentially true stories of the life and times of a political activist. His passing leaves an emptiness in our lives.

My deepest sympathies go to his sons, Nicholas, Paul, Amos and Eden, and to Hazel who played such an important part in his life and our struggle for freedom in South Africa.