



Summary

Conversation concert: Jewish refugees from Germany in Apartheid South Africa

Background: This year's anniversary "1700 Years of Jewish Life in Germany" also includes the story of German Jews who had to flee abroad from the Holocaust - like Ruth Weiss' family to South Africa. There, the refugees were confronted with the racism of the apartheid regime, which is why Jewish emigrants from Germany took up the fight against apartheid - among them the now 97-year-old Africa journalist and author Ruth Weiss.

Against this background, the Ruth Weiss Society and the German Africa Foundation, with the kind support of the Afrika-Haus Berlin, the Anne Frank Centre Berlin, the Embassy of the Republic of South Africa, the German-South African Forum e.V., and Pactum Africanum - Association for the Promotion of Abrahamic Dialogue in Africa, invited to a conversation concert with Ruth Weiss. Songs by Miriam Makeba, performed by singer Jarita Freysank and guitarist Arenor Anuku, alternated with the spoken word.

Highlights:

- Although the Jewish population during apartheid was only about 2.5% of the white population and only about 0.3% of the total population, Jews were visible in every aspect of the apartheid struggle - whether politically, legally, militarily or culturally.
- The refugee issue, racism and other forms of discrimination require a collective response based on the human dignity of all.
- Ruth Weiss' commitment against apartheid is a testimony to humanity.

Introduction

Lutz Kliche,

Ruth Weiss Association

Welcome Remarks

Pfarrer Hannes Langbein,

Director,

St. Matthäus Foundation

Laura Joyce,

Counsellor Political,

Embassy of the Republic of South Africa in Berlin

Discussion

Ruth Weiss,

Journalistin and author

Dr Uschi Eid,

President,

German Africa Foundation

Imamin Seyran Ates

Co-founder, *Ibn-Ruschd-*

Goethe-Moschee, Berlin

Dr Prinz Asfa-Wossen

Asserate

Chairman,

Pactum Africanum

Moderation

Hans-Werner, Bussmann

German-South African

Forum

After the introductory words of Pastor Hannes Langbein, Ruth Weiss gave her keynote speech. She began by recalling the political and economic context of South Africa in which the approximately 6,500 German-Jewish immigrants arrived in the country at the Cape between 1933 and 1936. Jews also encountered anti-Semitism in South Africa, ranging from anti-Semitic protests upon the arrival of Jewish refugees and the impediment of migration through additional financial hurdles to the official ban on the admission of Jews from Germany and Eastern Europe in 1937. On the ground, the working and living conditions of Jewish refugees were often precarious, Ruth Weiss continued. For example, professional qualifications were not recognised and the refugees were forced to work in the low-wage sector. In Johannesburg, a German-Jewish community had finally been founded with the support of the local Jewish community, while intellectuals, artists, politicians and communists and socialists - among them also non-Jews - had founded the *Independent Cultural Association (UKV)*.

The role of German Jews in the struggle against apartheid

Ruth Weiss described the reaction of the small Jewish community to the apartheid regime as a mixture of cooperation and struggle - often lacking the courage to openly criticise the regime. Among the members of the *UKV*, the racist system in South Africa had caused increasing horror, which had led to many Jews leaving the country. Others, according to Ruth Weiss, had become involved in the resistance against the apartheid regime, like herself. Together with other young people, she had published a youth magazine in which she had critically examined South African politics; others had documented their resistance to the regime by refusing to do South African military service. Some Jews had also joined the resistance group *Armed Resistance Movement*. Many Jews also held leading positions in the *African National Congress*. This was shown, for example, in the 1956 treason trial, where Jews made up about half of the whites on trial - including the best-known, Denis Goldberg, who was sentenced to life imprisonment. Although the Jewish population at the time made up only about 2.5% of the white population and only about 0.3% of the total population, Jews were visible in every aspect of the apartheid struggle - whether political, legal, military or cultural. She herself was declared *persona non grata* and had to leave South Africa, Ruth Weiss recounted. Even after her South African citizenship was revoked, however, she continued to be active against apartheid and reported critically on the policies of the apartheid regime in the German and English media.

The life of Ruth Weiss as a testimony to „Menschlichkeit“ (Engl. Humanity)

In her speech, Laura Joyce, Counsellor of the Embassy of the Republic of South Africa, underlined the important contribution Ruth Weiss had made in the fight against apartheid. Here she particularly emphasised Ruth Weiss' commitment to humanity.

The perception of the role of the Jewish diaspora in the anti-apartheid struggle

In the panel discussion, Mr Bussmann first addressed the panelists' personal experiences with the role of Jewish refugees from Germany in the anti-apartheid struggle. Ms Eid reported that it was only during her preparation for the event that she realised how many of the anti-apartheid campaigners she had met on her numerous trips to South Africa as a member of parliament for the *Bündnis 90/The Greens* parliamentary group had actually been Jewish. She

therefore felt the need to honour the courageous commitment, which went beyond mere religious affiliation and stood up for fundamental human rights.

Learning from the past

Dr Asfa-Wossen Assefate explained the contribution of his home country Ethiopia, which had supported the struggle against apartheid and, among other things, issued Nelson Mandela with an Ethiopian passport and participated in the training of the *ANC* militias, as well as the context of the emerging decolonisation movements on the continent. He stressed that the struggle against apartheid had been a struggle for human rights and called for learning from the mistakes of the apartheid system, which had been made both politically and economically. Every human being has the same claim to basic human rights and National Socialism and apartheid are still evidence today of how fragile these are.

People, human rights, human dignity

Imamin Seyran Ates also pointed out the parallels between the structures of National Socialism and apartheid and emphasised the importance of human dignity and humanity. Identity politics also divide society today and represent a form of apartheid. Therefore, Ms Seyran Ates pleaded for more humanity and the defence of human rights regardless of religious affiliation, origin, sexual identity and gender issues.

Music as a unifying element

In her closing remarks, Ms Ruth Weiss thanked singer Jarita Freysank and guitarist Arenor Anuku for the musical accompaniment of the evening and highlighted the impact of township music as a unifying element during the apartheid era.