

**Ruth Weiss**

**Letter of thanks for National Order “Companions of OR Tambo”**

**Dear friends and family:**

My sincere thanks to the South African government of President Cyril Ramaphosa for the unexpected great honour bestowed on me of the “Companions of OR Tambo” award!

I am most grateful to H.E. Ambassador Stone Sizani, who had a major role in achieving this. I also wish to thank Counselor Political Ms. Laura Joyce for her indispensable support, not least also for helping with arranging the trip at short notice. Thanks for that to the gentlemen at the South African Embassy in Denmark, Mr Solomon Dude, Mr Komane and Mr Sekwati, who handle the logistics. I would also like to express my thanks for the great hospitality in South Africa.

How could I forget not to be grateful to Konrad Melchers and the RW Society! They had prepared so much without my knowledge over a long period of time and made everything possible with the aid of Mr. Bssman and others, whose identity remains hidden from me! As I have said, my contribution to ending the abhorrent apartheid legislation, was minor compared with that of so many others.

Nevertheless: everything, the award, the meeting with old friends in South Africa, the trip itself in company with my dearest, is something I'll greatly treasure.

We were to arrive on April 24th, I was told. We - my son Alexander, myself and thanks to Konrad Melchers and the RW Society also my 15-year-old grandson Oliver.

We scarcely made it on the 24<sup>th</sup>! The plane from Copenhagen to Zurich faced a long delay. An athletic young official whisked me at record speed through lengthy corridors, while I clung to the wheelchair on which I sat. He moved at a pace that Alex and Oliver, both athletic, had trouble keeping up, until we finally made it in time for the waiting plane to wing our way to the Johannesburg OR Tambo Airport.

Just as well that I had not envisaged the New South Africa of 2023. The last time I was in South Africa was in Cape Town in 2011. Nothing had prepared me for the journey from Johannesburg – Joburg - to Pretoria! I remembered the '60s, before I flew to Germany in 1965 on a business trip that ended abruptly, when I was banned from returning. This distance then had been a comfortable short drive. Among other things, one passed Alexandra Township and a place named Halfway House before eventually driving through Pretoria's wide, uncluttered streets to reach one's goal. And now the government luxury car that had collected us on leaving the VIP suites at the airport, became just one of the innumerable first-rate cars on the highway to and from Pretoria. I was soon told that a good car and a topgradecellphone were priorities, even for the less well-off!

We passed no “Alex”, to which whites like us had driven each working day between January and June 1957 to save at least some Township Africans part of the 32km walk to Johannesburg, when they were staging a boycott against the bus company for raising the fare. There was also no Halfway-house or Bedfordview with the old farmhouse, which had been my last address in South Africa. Among the new names I sometimes spotted one that was familiar, such as Hardebeesfontein. Instead there were endless rows of various industrial sites and houses, ranging from magnificent villas to small houses in townships in some places. Finally we reached the foothills of the Magaliesberge, until a little later I recognised a hill. That was the spot where the Voortrekker Monument stood, once revered by the Afrikaans-speaking South Africans, to commemorate their victory at Blood River over

the Zulu warriors in 1938. Each year on the 16<sup>th</sup> December they had gathered there to celebrate the triumphant occasion. It is great that today that day is the Day of Reconciliation!

At the hotel we were greeted by the German filmmaker Gisela Venzke, who lives in South Africa and who had been waiting for the delayed plane at the airport for hours. That day was practically our only day of rest. The reason why we had been asked to arrive on the 25<sup>th</sup>, was a long introduction to the ceremony that was to take place when the awards were bestowed by the President. The highest order is the Companions of the OR Tambo. For me the highlight was meeting an old friend among the honored South Africans. BokweMafuna, now a handsome white-haired man in traditional dress, greeted me happily, saying, that he hadn't thought I was alive. We'd met in Cologne and stayed in touch while he lived in France, among other places. I owe him the acquaintance of young women and men who had fled abroad after 1976. I was glad yet also sad because she didn't see that day that Ethel de Kayser was honoured, who for decades had worked tirelessly in London to ensure the education of young people in exile.

After Freedom Day on the 27<sup>th</sup> April, the day of the award ceremony started at 09.00. A description of the beautifully decorated room, the great music, the bright clothes of those to be honoured, the guests and South African VIPs would be too much for you! Believe me, everything was well organized down to the last detail - you couldn't speak of boredom! However, there was a brief break before it all began, when those to be honoured were conducted to another hall to meet President Cyril Ramaphosa. He spoke to everyone individually, so that photos could be taken. I was delighted that he recalled our encounter in Belfast in the early 1990s. The now President, then the ANC spokesperson and his colleague Roelf Meyer, the National Party spokesperson during the lengthy ANC/NP negotiations, had given a lecture in the city, where I happened to be.

Judith Todd, the courageous daughter of the liberal South Rhodesian Prime Minister Garfield Todd, who had been living under house arrest from the illegal white minority regime, sent me an email from Zimbabwe: you stole the show! Dear Judy, just because I was the last and oldest, that's why I received applause, tongue slapping and a lot of empathy!

Lunch followed, with Ministers, Secretaries of State and other VIPs sitting informally at tables with the guests, mingling with them without formality.

The following days after this memorable day, we spent with Mr. Venzke and his team. I travelled back in time, for we visited several places that had once been my stamping ground, which I now in South Africa and other spots I once knew well and now didn't recognise. The first stop was at the house in which our family lived after our arrival in South Africa. The last and most important for me was a visit to my dear parent's graves. I was finally able to say goodbye to my father, as I had not been allowed to visit him during during the apartheid era, when he was terminally ill.

On our tour we had passed horrifying shacks situated along an endless stretch of rubble. One of the signs that despite the democratic constitution, vi id civil society and a country clearly visible as African, South Africa has yet to achieve Nelson Mandela's perfect rainbow nation. Today's government has to meet the challenge of many problems, among these the wide rich-poor gap.

Mandela had written that it is not sufficient to throw off one's chains, one also had to live in a way that respects and cares for others. A goal that still has to be fought for in viewmof today's rightward swing, prejudices and conspiracy theories.

MAY I WISH SOUTH AFRICA, ITS PEOPLE - AND ALL OF YOU - ALL THE BEST NOW AND IN FUTURE,  
ruth