

Queen of Sheba Rose Planting at the South African Embassy Berlin

Ruth Weiss - Words of Thanks 24 March, 2022

Es gilt das gesprochene Wort.

I am deeply touched and very grateful to His Excellency, Ambassador **Stone Sizani** that I have been given the honour of planting this beautiful Rose in the garden of South Africa's Embassy in Berlin.

This plant is a symbol of a woman after whom it is named and who represents womanhood, which suits a queen of Africa, the cradle of humankind. It brings several issues to mind. Firstly it symbolises the magnificent death-defying struggle of the South African people for equality, freedom and democracy. Secondly the name of the Rose – the Sheba Rose – is an African name, that of the Queen of Sheba. A mythical woman known to all three monotheistic religions, about whom many legends have been spun. She and King Solomon are said to be the parents of the ruler of Ethiopia through the ages, down to the former Emperor Haile Selassie.

This has some personal meaning for me. Not only because of my first visit to Addis Abeba during the Emperors time when my cousin Joe, another South African, who had fought against Hitler in the SA Airforce to become head of Ethiopia's airline for 20 years. It was because I met Ethiopians, who were Jews and were later duly accepted as such by the Jewish Rabbis. They are by no means the only African people with a Jewish history. The Lemba of Southern Africa claim a Jewish and Arabic background, as shown by some of their customs and proved through their genes. In Sao Tomé one of the group of ancestors of the Creole people were Jews sent to the island in the Middle Ages by a Portuguese King. Another important link is the sacrifice of a large number of Jews in the vanguard of the struggle against apartheid, to name only Joe Slovo and his wife Ruth First, both of whom I knew and admired.

The honour which I have been accorded through the Sheba Rose, I feel is symbolic for the many nameless anti-apartheid activists and supporters, who fought in their own way, just as I did – once it was said with my typewriter. It brought me banning, the loss of my passport and permission to live in South Africa, later also in Southern Rhodesia. It also gave me many friends. When I was young in the far-off forties and fifties we always said: in five years it will all be over. But the five years stretched to nearly fifty, before Nelson Mandela walked free and a new South Africa was born. I salute those who gave their lives and the many who stood up to be counted, when it mattered.

This Rose on whom the Queen of Sheba's name was bestowed, this universal figure in Jewish, Islamic, Christian mythology was perceived as wise, beautiful and powerful. It is a black woman therefore, who through her namesake the Sheba Rose represents unity and peace.

Your Excellency, ladies and gentlemen, my many thanks.