



IDEA Banners of Honor are displayed at a ceremony of remembrance held for persons affected by leprosy at a cemetery on Robben Island.

While in South Africa I also visited Robben Island, used to isolate persons with leprosy from 1846 to 1931, and more recently famous as the place where Nelson Mandela served 18 years of a 27-year prison sentence. IDEA and ILA’s Global Project on the History of Leprosy had organized a workshop on stigma, identity and human rights in association with the Robben Island Museum. The program included a moving ceremony at the so-called “Leper Graveyard” on the island to remember those buried there.

When the Robben Island leprosy asylum was closed down in 1931, patients were transferred to other leprosy sanatoria on the mainland. One of these was Westfort, near the capital, Pretoria, which I had visited a few days earlier.

Westfort Leper Institution opened in 1898 and was one of only two multiracial leprosaria in South Africa. From 1948, under South Africa’s apartheid system, patients who were already isolated from society by their disease were subject to further segregation within the hospital on the basis on their race — giving a special character to the leprosy experience in South Africa.

When it opened, Westfort housed 1,450 patients. But for much of the 20th century it was

home to an average 200 to 300 patients. It was run like a small town, and had a post office, clinic, churches, pharmacy and shop. However, two guards were posted at the entrance, and visits from family members were restricted to once every two weeks, with patients forced to sit behind a glass screen in a prison-like atmosphere when they received visitors.

Hospitalization for leprosy treatment was compulsory in South Africa until 1977, after which specialized institutions for leprosy began to shut down. Westfort, the last of these, closed in 1997.

After visiting Westfort, I called on Johann, 55, a recovered person who lives with his wife, daughter and two granddaughters in the suburbs of Johannesburg. Before being diagnosed with leprosy and sent to Westfort, he was a steel worker. Unfortunately, his MDT treatment was interrupted, as a result of which he suffers disability in his right eye and leg. Without regular work, he receives a disability allowance from the South African government. Although he has the support of his wife and family, he has no contact with the neighbors, and when he goes to hospital once a month for a checkup, he is seen separately from other patients. I was troubled to hear Johann say he feels he has no place in society, and sometimes thinks he was better off in Westfort. But his comments renewed my determination to root out discrimination.

Leprosy FACT

● Robben Island became a hospital for people with leprosy, mental illness and chronic diseases in 1846. Initially, many leprosy patients went there voluntarily, but after the 1891 Leprosy Suppression Act, hospitalization was compulsory. Black and white patients had separate wards, with white patients receiving better accommodation, food and medical treatment. The hospital was closed in 1931.

MADAGASCAR (FEBRUARY 5-9)

From South Africa I proceeded to Madagascar, where I attended a World Leprosy Day event organized by the Ministry of Health and sponsored by the Association Francaise Raoul Follereau (AFRF). I also met with the prime minister and health minister and visited a number of health facilities.

Lying off the southeast coast of Africa,



Johann and his family in Johannesburg