

Now he is gone, our Hans, and he is not gone.

In the beginning he, the Dutchman, made provocative comments to me, the German, about the Nazi times and the occupation of his country by the Germans. Once he even greeted me with his upstretched arm and the Nazi salutation. I felt insulted and reacted very angrily. He smiled and I could see in his eyes that I had passed a kind of test.

Once, when I was PSI's European Secretary I went to him and told him I was worrying about a mistake made in my area of responsibility because a decision was not taken according to the constitution. He could have used it against me, he could have criticised me heavily, but he soothed me and found a good solution.

On another occasion, I was angry with him and criticised him for going without me into a meeting that had to do with my work and was politically and personally sensitive. He didn't listen and did what he did. Later, after knowing more about what happened in that meeting I went to him and apologised because I had understood that his political instinct was far beyond my conviction about right and wrong.

We, his colleagues, could enter his office at any time and talk to him as to a colleague, as one of us. I remember him often leaving his office in the evening when he dropped in asking me how things were going and how I was. He was one of these typical men of the war and post war generation, who couldn't show warm and tender emotions. At the same time, everybody who knew him saw his warm and big heart shining through the hard shell that should protect him. Many people inside and outside the PSI Head Office could tell stories about how Hans helped without making much noise about it.

He was one of the last traditional working class leaders, sometimes with authoritarian tendencies, with own original experiences as a worker, with a very deep political instinct, never forgetting where he belonged. He could stand criticism, and he liked using direct and open language. Arrogance, feeling better or more important than anybody else was never part of Hans' character, and everybody felt that. You could agree or disagree with him, could like him or not, but he was always the authentic Hans and there was never a double face behind a mask.

And finally, he was a leftist in the best sense of the word. He would never have stooped to ingratiate himself with powerful politicians, he hated the neo-liberal policies because they made the powerful stronger, the rich richer, the poor poorer and more vulnerable, and he despised those – including trade union leaders – who made a big show around themselves. In one word, Hans knew to which side of the barricade he belonged.

With all his weaknesses and mistakes, his strong sides and skills, he is our Hans. I owe him much and I'm thankful because he allowed me to learn from him – from his mistakes as much as from his good deeds. Now he is dead, and he is alive in my mind and heart, as he is in the minds and hearts of many workers. I'm sad.

Jürgen Buxbaum, 13 April 2015