

Happy 90th Birthday to Bernhard Worms!

Bernhard Worms, my predecessor as President of the ESU

In 2009, I met Bernhard Worms for the first time as a speaker at a regional congress of the European Seniors' Union-ESU in Eupen. The CD&V-Seniors organized the congress together with the CDH in preparation for the European elections. Shortly afterwards, I was asked if I would take on a more significant role in the Association? In 2013, I was nominated for the position of President of the ESU as the successor to Bernhard Worms, who has led the Association for 12 years with his charisma and contributed to its growth through contacts in the new EU Member States.

At the beginning of my Presidency in 2013, I became the head of an Association of members and dedicated volunteers across Europe, which included:

The task of shaping the growth of our Association, in the European People's Party (EPP), headed by the newly elected President Joseph Daul as successor to Wilfried Martens! All this in a turbulent Europe, which was recovering from an economic crisis, struggling with internal and global tensions and seeking solutions to many new political issues. Our role as the ESU is limited by the play of forces, but it is not insignificant. I see us as being a bridge between the political decision-makers and the citizens. We are involved in a political party, the EPP, within which we symbolize the vision of seniors and work for an inclusive coexistence between generations, respecting each generation in its own way. In doing so, we are in accord with international organizations defending the rights of seniors, and therefore we work together with partners from civil society. "Empowerment" and "education for active citizenship" are key concepts in the educational and meeting opportunities we offer our members. The keynote themes and visions are reflected in headlines such as "Seniors standing up for Europe", the theme of our last ESU Congress.

Bernhard Worms: a strong president

When I became President in 2013, I made the following statement at the ESU Congress in recognition of the work of my predecessor:

"Dear Bernhard, I met you for the first time as President in Pulheim. I felt your connection with the community, the people and the local population there. You are a President who puts his heart and soul into everything he does with enormous persuasiveness. Since Pulheim, my appreciation for you, your efforts, your knowledge, your simplicity and warm humanity is growing constantly."

I heard you repeatedly saying, happily and contentedly, at the end of a congress or meeting: "Thank God. If my health permits, I would like to continue my efforts." We are pleased with you and are grateful for your work. The power of your conviction is rooted in your whole personality! This penetrates you like the sap penetrates a tree, from the root to the crown. Your roots are your family, your closeness to the people, your deeply Christian conviction that a loving God carries life and graciously calls upon every person to be 'a brother' for his fellow human beings. You see society from this point of view, and

cope with joy and suffering, activity and cheerfulness, culture and politics in every phase! We have therefore gladly taken over your path and have remained true to the breadth of your activities. I deliberately said 'remained' because I know and see that you appreciate and value people and friendships throughout your life and even beyond the grave.

"Dear Bernhard, you have a very strong personality!

For many years you were the 'face' of the European Seniors' Union (ESU), in the European People's Party (EPP) and beyond. You have given expression and language to the experiences, the perseverance and also the vulnerability of hundreds of thousands of senior citizens. You have supported their rights and commitment to a peaceful and solidly united Europe and to a citizenship that acts responsibly. With your work, your persuasiveness, your direct approach when you meet people, you motivate and value those who listen. This was the hallmark of your presidency. For you, Christian values are the basis of your lifelong political commitment and the value-based action in Europe that you advocate.

Dear President, dear Bernhard, it is a privilege to meet you in this commitment. I hope that the esteem in which you are held will continue to exist in the ESU in the future I thank you for your work, your value-based approach and for your friendship.

"In friendship I'd like to serve, if you want and as long as I can"

In a "young" Association like the ESU, which was founded in 1995, there are few traditions regarding the position of former presidents. Bernhard Worms, after twelve years of presidency and having played a significant role in the Association since its foundation, did not wish to accept the title of "Honorary President" Nevertheless, he remained willing to continue to contribute his experience and knowledge.

I found this a nice offer, but I was not sure if this attitude could be implemented. With such a strong personality... Wouldn't he be too dominant at our meetings?

No, it worked. After six years, we can look back with satisfaction on the role that Bernhard Worms played as former President.

First and foremost, this is thanks to Bernhard Worms himself. When he is present at meetings, he can remain silent or keep his opinions to himself until informal contact is made, and he knows how to dispense possible speeches excellently. His presence and his opinion will always remain in my good memory. Also, his: "Oh, dear friend, I share your opinion and I support you..." after a phone call will remain in my memory for a long time. He also "enjoys" his regular presence and meetings with people. A few years ago he said: "You are the best medicine for me."

Although he now continued to follow the events in the ESU and took them to heart in terms of content, there was one aspect in particular which preoccupied him: the cooperation of young and old with a common perspective: "The future of Europe" And this was never just a pious wish. This topic was discussed at congresses! It even flowed into the name of a foundation: "Youth and Seniors for Europe", and finally became a focal point in the work of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) through his participation.

"Youth and seniors together for Europe!"

When the ESU set out to achieve “Solidarity between generations”, through unity and dialogue, it followed a trend that had been developed in international organizations and in the EU since the end of the 20th century. This culminated in 1993 in a “European Year of Older People and Solidarity between Generations” and became the starting point of various policy initiatives, which were primarily aimed at better integrating seniors into society.

In 2007, the principle of solidarity between the generations was included in the Lisbon Treaty as one of the key elements for increasing the well-being of the population. On 29th April 2008, during a meeting in Brdo (Slovenia) under the title “Intergenerational Solidarity for Cohesive and Sustainable Societies”, the first Slovenian Presidency of the European Union called for attention to be drawn to the importance of intergenerational solidarity every 29th of April. At the same time, the organization of a Year for “Active Ageing and Intergenerational Solidarity” (2012) was announced. In this important period for Europe, the ESU has played an active role, together with other seniors’ organizations and above all thanks to cooperation with members of the European Parliament! In the meantime, various factors have contributed to the shift in emphasis and political questions on the subject of “demographic change” This was clearly reflected in a number of options and discussions in the EPP.

Triggered by the economic crisis, high youth unemployment, the migration of well-educated young people from Eastern and Southern Europe to the Western Member States, the rural exodus in some regions, uncontrolled migration etc., a higher life expectancy and low birth rates were reassessed as fundamental factors of demographic change. This also showed that Europe needed to work on a global strategy, but that the Member States and regions themselves must tackle the problems independently and in a targeted manner. This has already been reflected in the options proposed by the new European Commission, under the leadership of Ursula von der Leyen, to ensure that the complexity of the demographic challenges in Europe and in the Member States is understood and that appropriate measures are taken in all levels of society.

The latter will indeed be the great challenge. To achieve this, many policy areas will have to be addressed. But the need for intergenerational cooperation remains a constant. Older people are prepared to share their experience and knowledge, to invest time and energy in order to build sustainable future prospects together with the younger generation. Both political decision-makers and actors in civil society can stimulate and facilitate this cooperation.

In line with the initiatives already developed at the suggestion of Bernhard Worms, the ESU intends to continue working on this.

A dynamic view of people and society

Bernhard Worms is a convinced Christian who loves the rituals and takes part in them by praying and singing. More than once we were witnesses to this. The Gospel inspires him in his actions — also in his political actions. With openness, respect and much experience he is open to the views of his fellows, their religious convictions and their view of society. He suffers from the current chaos and continues to try to restore the trust and cooperation of society and politics. To this end, he continues to study, write texts, act as a speaker and enjoy discussions afterwards.

Ever since I have known him, I was aware from him that he had been ill for a short time or was under investigation in hospital. But he is with us again.

Even though he is aware of his age, he is always happy when he comes home after a medical examination without negative results.

Active ageing, lifelong learning, the development of new skills, the gaining of new knowledge, time to reflect on existential questions of life characterize him ... At every meeting I see Bernhard Worms as a good person who finds happiness every day in his family, in his beloved Pulheim and beyond that in football, and he radiates it. His presidency of the ESU and also his current involvement in our work shows that the “deficit model” of ageing, which is based on “inactivity and functional reduction”, does not apply to him. For him, the “competence models”, which are based on a forward-looking open-mindedness and the development of new competences, are more suitable.

Based on this personal dynamic, his intuition, but also using the latest concepts of ageing, in the “society of longevity”, he interpreted the changes in this society and the experiences and needs of older people in a unique, committed way and developed visions for the future.

He also enjoyed drawing inspiration from leading scientists and politicians. I had the pleasure of meeting one of them a few times: Ursula Lehr. She impressed me with her encyclopedic knowledge of seniors and senior citizens' policy. The conceptual framework within which she moved was so familiar to me that I felt “at home” when thinking about people and society; for it reflected the frame of reference of my own education at the Catholic University of Leuven. Life as a gift and a task, “the human being: has himself as a task” each person, responsible for and with others, even in old age, that was the basic vision that I gained from the lectures on genetic psychology and fundamental pedagogy by Albert Kriekemans (1906-1986), who spoke with great appreciation of his German colleague Hans Thomae (1915-2001), with whom Ursula Lehr worked for many years, and to whom, by the way, KU Leuven awarded an honorary doctorate. This common view may have been a basis for the solidarity from which we derived initiatives, a basic attitude to approach people.

And the future

The shadows become longer, the scope for action decreases, as does the cosmopolitanism ... I have experienced it for years with my father as well as with older people in my environment. Not so with Bernhard Worms. When we meet, there are so many stories and worries about people and events that time is always short. And of course he is still particularly interested in the further development of our ESU. There are so many questions and challenges to work on, but there are also many limitations and obstacles: limited financial resources, insufficient volunteers, and weak interest from the party leadership. Bernhard Worms knows what voluntary work can only achieve, depending on how strong its charisma is and how it provides cohesion, creativity, joy ... This applies to living together in local communities, but also to Associations across borders.

I therefore hope that the ESU, also inspired by Bernhard Worms, will continue to work and grow, so that it can:

1. Enjoy life with and for good people in a society of longevity;

2. Based on a personality vision, to build a discrimination-free, inclusive society in which older people are respected — including in long-term care and at the end of life;
3. Participating in policy actions in response to changing challenges and opportunities in the areas of economic growth and people's well-being; to strengthen social protection and poverty reduction, lifelong learning and prevention of loneliness, etc.
4. Cooperation is developed between generations as a cornerstone of the social market economy, as part of the mainstream of policy-making and taking into account that differences and contradictions in Europe require exchange, dialogue and the recognition that cooperation makes for greater strength;
5. The belief in a united Europe from East to West, from North to South persists and one is always touched when one meets people who have travelled a long and difficult road towards freedom, peace, justice and democracy and ... can continue to work in solidarity.

“Seniors standing up for Europe” was the theme of our recent congress in Sandanski, Bulgaria (27-28 September 2019). We hope and wish that we could share this commitment to Europe with Bernhard Worms for a long time to come.

An Hermans

Leefdaal, December 2019

