

Obituary

## Gentle Trotskyist: Sal Santen (1915-1998)

Wednesday 30 March 2016, by [ETTY Elspeth](#) (Date first published: 1998).

IN his hometown of Amsterdam, the town where he came into this world on 5 August 1915, the writer and mild-mannered Trotskyist Sal Santen passed away on Saturday, 25 July. He was still full of life, recovering from a serious hip operation when he unexpectedly died from a heart attack.

The last years of his life, which he spent in the Beth Shalom Old People's Home, were hard. However many heart-wrenching novels he devoted to the subject, the sorrow over the extermination of his family in the war never subsided, and became worse as his physical condition deteriorated. The death of his wife Beb five years ago was difficult to bear. Nevertheless, he continued to fight, as he had done all his life. With his typical whispering voice, he told those close to him: 'Life is always worth living, however difficult the circumstances are.'

'Brave because it is good' was the life-long motto of Sal Santen, who described himself as someone who in his heart was always a 'scared little Jewish boy'. He had borrowed this motto, which was also the title of one of his books, from the farewell letter of his father-in-law, the resistance hero Henk Sneevliet, written just before his death in front of a German firing squad. Through Sneevliet, Sal Santen, himself coming from the poverty-stricken family of a shoemaker who supported the SDAP [1], landed in the revolutionary movement during the 1930s. When Santen decided for Trotsky and his Fourth International, their ways parted.

After the traumatic occupation years, Santen became even more convinced of his militant standpoint. Together with the Greek Michel Raptis, he became one of the leaders of the Fourth International. In 1953, he left for Latin America to stimulate the revolution amongst peasants and workers. Back in the Netherlands in 1960, he was arrested for his support for the Algerian Liberation Front (FLN). He had assisted with a clandestine arms factory in Morocco, and by forging identity documents and providing false money for Algerian nationalists. With Raptis, he was held in custody for a year, and after an infamous political trial was sentenced to 15 months. The long period on remand led to worldwide protests, and led to Santen receiving messages of sympathy from, amongst others, Jean Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir and Salvador Allende. In the celebrated documentary *Sal Santen Rebel*, a reference to Santen's book *Sneevliet Rebel*, made by the film director Rudolf van den Berg in 1982, Sal Santen recalled how he had defended forging identity papers to the judge: 'From my experience, I knew that such a scrap of paper could mean life or death.'

At the end of the 1960s, Santen broke with the International Secretariat of the Fourth International, not for political reasons – he continued to call himself a Trotskyist until his death – but because he couldn't cope personally. He was too soft, too human and too emotional to be a professional revolutionary. His political commitment came from his humanity. Those who knew him or saw his bushy hair and soft brown eyes could see that fanaticism was alien to him.

At the end of the 1960s, Santen began to suffer increasingly from the effects of his traumatic war experiences which expressed themselves in unbearable physical pain. He came to be treated by the

psychiatrist Coen van Emde Boas, who encouraged him to write about the deportation of his parents and his brother Maurits. That resulted in novels such as *You People are Jewish People (Jullie is jodenfolk)*, his first novel, from 1969, and *Saartje Baked Bones* (1983), dedicated to his sister who died at a young age from tuberculosis. The tangible mourning for Saartje, in book after book, was linked by Santen in an unparalleled way with the almost incomprehensible enormity of the destruction of the rest of his family and all the other Jews of Amsterdam. Only in this way could he verbally express his loss.

When he already had 10 well-received books to his name, including his impressive political memoirs *Adios Companeros!*, he told me that he wrote exclusively in order to give his three children their murdered family back. Politics finally turned out not to be the centre of his life. A few years ago, I asked him to draw a balance of his life. 'The most important thing is my family', he answered, 'That as a Jew I could still build a family is very important. And beyond that ... I became a writer.'

## **Elsbeth Etty**

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## **P.S.**

\* <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/revhist/backiss/vol7/no2/etty.html>

\* Translated by Colin O'Driscoll.

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## **Footnotes**

[1] The SDAP (Social Democratic Labour Party) was the predecessor of Dutch Labour Party.