

# LESSONS ON SUSTAINABILITY AND A MEANINGFUL LIFE

**Hans Baumgarten was an inspiration to both his family and the industry as a whole, says son and Baumgartens EVP David**

I was given the opportunity to pen some thoughts and memories of my father Hans Baumgarten who passed away on 3 September 2017 at the age of 93.

Our family surname Baumgarten is German and means 'orchard'. Trees naturally compete for light, and my Dad always understood that while his own business was merely like a single tree, he himself was a gardener and that if the whole orchard does not thrive, hungry people will be at the gates.

He knew hunger too. He escaped death in 1939 as a 14-year-old immigrant on the Kindertransport to London. Dad worked in a bakery to support his mother and younger brother. I remember him saying: "Walking home, rubble was everywhere. A chicken ran off and dropped an egg. I ate it there and then."

## STEEPED IN FAITH

My Dad had tremendous faith. Landing on the Normandy beaches at the age of just 18, he drove an American general in his jeep towards the front line. "We plummeted down an icy embankment, holding on for dear life. No control. God reached down, grabbed our little jeep and wedged us sweetly between two trees. Not a scratch!"

A few years later he met my mother Jean in Washington DC. They moved to Atlanta and ultimately had five children. In 1948, they rebuilt the family business that had originated in Austria many years before with my father's parents.

Dad valued 'connectedness' with all his relationships and always talked about the impact families have on each other.

"Treat people we do business with as family, as if we'll be taking care of each other for generations." That principle has stood the test of time - I now work with the grandchildren of my grandfather's peers!

Some corporations today abuse vendors, employees and the planet for profits. It's become the norm. The justification? "It's just business."

My Dad wasn't like that and his people-centricity extended to the planet. As a boy, he would say: "People are not unlike fish in a bowl. We can't see the water we're swimming

**"What [is] happening to the planet simply can't go on. It's not nature's job to have concern for us"**

in. Unless the caretaker changes it, it gets polluted. Pee and poo suffocate the fish. It's not pretty." Quite so. We're the fish, our planet is the bowl, and unless we take it on ourselves our only caretaker is Mother Nature, altering our biosphere in search of equilibrium. The Anthropocene epoch has begun: people's unmistakable impact on the planet.

Walking around a global retailer, Dad would say: "This stapler wouldn't last a year. The one on your desk is three generations old, cost five times more but lasts 75 times as long. You do the math!"

And then the questions: "How long until all this stuff hits landfill? Is the wood used from managed forests? What happens to water runoff from deforestation? What happens to local ecosystems and the people on those lands?" His view was that what was



**Hans Baumgarten with a shot-down German plane in World War II**

happening to the planet simply can't go on. It's not nature's job to have concern for us. There are consequences and they will have an impact on our children's lives and health.

Some people have a worldview that says there is no inherent meaning in life, so they grab what they can while they can. Others believe there is natural meaning, that they are a part of something greater and that there are seen and unseen consequences with each action.

When I joined the family business in 1996, Dad handed me a book entitled *Being God's Partner* and said: "When man loses sight of his maker, choices get muddled. Keep Him in mind in all things and you will be able to sleep at night."

## OFFERING INSPIRATION

While he enjoyed telling a good joke or two, when it came to the important stuff, my Dad did not kid around. When I was dealing with cancer as a young man, he said to me: "We will die one day and we don't know when, so what kinds of relationships will we create in the meantime? And what kind of a world can we inspire together and leave behind?"

I will be forever grateful for my Dad's wisdom and for letting it sink into both my life and my work. I believe and I hope that he has had the same effect on many other people he came into contact with during his lifetime.



**Hans Baumgarten's legacy lives on through his children. His son David became EVP of the business in 2005.**