

MY ENCOUNTERS WITH MARTINUS VELTMAN

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I was introduced to Professor Martinus Veltman by my friend Theo Ruijgrok, who was his college professor at the University of Utrecht. They were both students of Leon Van Hove, to whom I was also attached. The meeting took place during the sixties at CERN, where I was spending two years at a post-doc position. Naturally, I already knew Professor Veltman at the time, though not personally, as I would never have dared approach the great man.

After this first encounter, however, I had occasion to see him more often, particularly since he was a good friend of Jacques Prentki, with whom I used to have lunch regularly at the CERN cafeteria. Veltman would often join us and thus I was able to get to know his views and ideas about the world much better. I understood that, under the guise of simplicity and bluntness, he was a brilliant man of great kindness and empathy. This image of Tini has remained seared in my memory ever since, even though events and details have become blurred in my mind and difficult to recollect. Therefore, I will have to limit myself to a few disconnected snapshots.

I would like to start with a story about Vim Klein, a CERN employee who had an astonishing ability to multiply huge numbers. His typical performance would begin with his asking members of the audience to give him two very large numbers. A few seconds later he would provide their product, without ever making a single mistake, as far as I know. Klein was a Dutch Jew, who had survived the occupation hiding in a closet. To help him make a living, CERN employed him as a “handy calculator”, whom scientists could ask for assistance in numerical calculations. With the advent of computers,

the need for his services vanished and it was decided that Klein should learn programming to remain useful. One needs to remember that at this early stage, computer programs were written in machine code, which is very hard, and only a few people were able to master it. Even when FORTRAN became available, any help with programming was always very welcome and Vin Klein was still useful. The punchline of this story is, however, that Klein never learned any programming. All these years it was in fact Tini Veltman who wrote the programs for him! As far as I am aware, nobody knew about this, at least until Klein's retirement.

My second snapshot is of a scene in Tini's office at CERN. I do not remember how the subject came up in the conversation (there were other people present), but at some point Tini said: "I was very close to discovering the Goldstone boson. Really close. Unfortunately, I overlooked it." And then he added, "One always overlooks something. What's important, though, is that one should not overlook EVERYTHING." This remark haunted me for many years.

I also remember a conversation with Tini which illustrates his approach to physics and how it is done. I think it also took place at his office. I was in one of these states of mind when one problem has already been finished, but no new problem is yet in sight. "Tini," I said, "perhaps you could suggest something worthwhile to do next?" His answer was: "I will not tell you, because I know for sure that no matter what I might suggest, you would still go your own way." As far as I can tell, he was right. Physicists are like that.

For many years Tini Veltman served as editor of *Physics Letters B* (after his friend Jacques Prentki got tired and gave up this position). Everybody, our group included, wanted to publish most of our papers there, as it was the most prestigious European physics journal at that time. This usually went quite smoothly but on one occasion my paper was rejected. I no longer remember what the paper was about, nor what year it was. I have also lost the letter from the editor, so I cannot quote it verbatim. However, I do remember the gist very well indeed. It went something like this: We have already published four papers of yours this year, and since I do not believe you can write five good papers in one year, I shall not publish this one. This could have made me rather angry if it came from anybody else but Tini Veltman. His attitude to life, illustrated by this story — never try to be too serious — was both disarming and contagious.

Over the years, Veltman gave many proofs of his fondness for Poles and Poland. I think this was one of the reasons for his longtime friendship with Prentki, his support for *Acta Physica Polonica* and his frequent visits to our country. He often explained these feelings by mentioning that, as a teenage boy, he witnessed Polish tanks liberate Holland.

This reminiscence would be incomplete if I did not mention Tini Veltman's friendship with Wiesław Czyż. They met when Wiesław was spending some time at the University of Utrecht, and this encounter grew into a very deep relation. I think the reason was the mutual recognition of their moral, human and intellectual values. Whatever the reason, the fact is that these two fine men became very close indeed. Suffice it to say that when Tini visited Poland for the last time, ostensibly to participate in a conference commemorating professor Mięslowicz, it was really to see Wiesław. The two families spent together several pleasant days in Cracow and as the guests were departing, nobody suspected that this would be the last goodbye for the two friends . . .