

From captain in the army to Gandhi of the environment. Martin Vosseler has changed his life completely, to fight peacefully, yet resiliently, for the environment. This fight takes precedence over his own health.

Wearing a red Jack Wolfskin hi-tech outdoor jacket, and hand-knitted, violet socks in worn-out slippers, the 55-yr old Martin Vosseler sits half in the shade on a bench in front of St. Elisabeth's Church in Basel. A compressor keeps the high-pressure jet running noisily, so that the church façade can be cleaned from the pollution of civilisation.

As inconsistent as his style of clothing, are the contradictions in Martin Vosseler's life: earlier, physician and captain of the army; today, environmental activist and pacifist. On one occasion, as business manager of the organisation "sun21", he sits together with Al Gore, former vice president of the USA. On another occasion he walks in sandals from Basel to Jerusalem. Whether protest marches, hunger-strikes or the organisation of the international energy forum "sun21", Martin Vosseler's activities today are all derived from the same motivation: "I dedicate my life completely to the protection of the living planet."

### **Career as Straight as an Arrow**

The son of a geography professor and a nurse, Martin Vosseler grew up in the city of Basel. He has a brother one year his elder, and a half-sister and half-brother both almost 30 years older still. According to Martin Vosseler, his parents have shown him, that resistance is necessary in life. They took action against the destruction of nature, and were not afraid to take sides, if they thought someone was suffering an injustice. When necessary, their active engagement even led them to take stance in front of the cabinet. "As a boy this civil courage rather got on my nerves", says Martin Vosseler. For example, when his mother complained to the headmaster, because Martin's teacher had deigned to give the class a collective punishment, yet again.

He describes himself as a shy and nervous child, who only felt really at ease when he was out in nature. After secondary school came sixth-form college, medical studies, training to internist and later to psychotherapist. "Up to the age of 33, I had a career as straight as an arrow", he sums up. "I was well-adjusted and always did what the community expected me to do." The only blot in Vosseler's copy book, was his action in 1975 against the planned nuclear power station Kaiseraugst, that was to be built 20 km from his own front door. He experienced the project as a completely unscientific, but very real threat, and therefore took part in the demonstrations against it. As a junior resident, he couldn't find the time for more active engagement than this.

### **Nobel Peace Prize and Imprisonment**

At the beginning of the 1980s he travelled to Harvard University in Boston to carry out a research project. However, his interest in his studies was soon overtaken by his interest in the courses in psychosomatic medicine, which tackled the interplay of body and soul. When his research supervisor came to Boston from Switzerland, to find out how the research work was progressing, Vosseler enthused about family therapy, self-hypnosis for the overweight and Gestalt therapy. It dawned on his supervisor: "Mr Vosseler, I believe you have lost your way." He gave him 3 weeks to decide whether to continue with the research project or not.

Vosseler decided against the research, and in 1982, opened a practice in Basel, where he worked largely as a psychotherapist.

He joined the association “International Physicians for Prevention of Nuclear War” and founded a branch in Switzerland. The association had great success with stopping the testing of nuclear weapons, and in 1985, together with his fellow activists, Vosseler was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. In light of the renewed increasing danger of a nuclear war, Vosseler is greatly relieved that the association still exists today, although his engagement with them is only peripheral: “nowadays, my activities are focussed on issues of energy and environment”.

Despite his stance against nuclear armament, Martin Vosseler still went into the field for years as a captain in the Swiss army with his soldiers. A visit to the Peace Memorial Museum in Hiroshima at the end of the 1980s, caused him deep dismay. “The tears still come to my eyes, when I think back.” On his return to Switzerland, it was clear to him that he had to put an end to his army career. He refused his service as captain and in 1990 was sentenced to 30 days semi-imprisonment. Every morning, after spending the night in his prison cell, Vosseler watched the sunrise, and from then on, the need grew in him, to apply himself for solar energy. “We still have not learned the complete use of solar energy”.

In 1992 he organised a “solar week“, the forerunner of the energy forum from “sun21” – an association, which applies itself for the sustainable usage of solar energy (see box). In 1993, together with his best friend Bruno Manser, who in the meantime has been missing from Borneo for 4 years, Vosseler went on hunger-strike outside the Bundeshaus (parliament), to move the cabinet to stop the import of tropical wood from Sarawak in Malaysia. In 1995, Vosseler completed the break-away from his earlier life once and for all, by closing his medical practice on the Rhine.

### **From Basel to Jerusalem on Foot**

Vosseler moves from the shade of St. Elisabeth’s Church to a bench in the sun. “Thanks to solar energy there’s a temperature increase of at least 5°C”, he effuses. He explains his change from career man to missionary for nature: “We are all part of God’s wonderful creation, with an overwhelming idea behind it. I simply cannot imagine, that this creation should come to an end so suddenly.”

On the one hand, a pilgrimage for his own religious experience, and on the other hand, to raise awareness “for the change to a sustainable-energy future”, Martin Vosseler set out on a 6-month foot-march in sandals from Basel to Jerusalem in the middle of 2003. Vosseler refutes that his fight for a better environment involves much personal privation. “The very opposite is true.” On his pilgrimage he was richly rewarded with generous hospitality, fine food and very sound sleep, after the effort of the daily march.

Also in Switzerland, walking is for Vosseler a way to recharge his batteries, the same as his morning yoga and exercise routine. Whenever he has time, the environmental activist makes his way to his farmhouse in the Zulg valley, north of the Lake of Thun. In this “wonderful place”, which can only be reached by a 40-minute walk, and from where no artificial light can be seen, he can relax. He enjoys playing the violin, he paints with passion, and now and then appears at small events as a political stand-up comedian. “It’s not good for me only to give serious presentations all the time.” Another passion is learning poetry by heart. This is very good memory training. Vosseler recognises himself in the poems of Rainer Maria Rilke. Things of worldwide popularity, such as football, interest him far less. “No one has ever been able to make me understand what an “offside” is.”

## **Desparation Excluded**

“On the pilgrimage I was sometimes happy to be able to relate something about the Basel football club. The Yakin brothers, for example, are very well-known in Turkey.” His pilgrimage triggered a large echo in the media: more than 50 million people had seen programs about him and his mission in the news. People often approached him and spoke with him in the street accordingly.

In an area of desert, the environmental wanderer experienced an unbelievable storm. Without any protection at all, he remained crouched on the ground for a very long time. “In anxiety, despair, tears and mourning over my parents, Bruno Manser, the tortured mother earth.” Suddenly warmth on the skin: the sun had fought its way through the clouds. “That was a wonderful feeling of rescue and comfort.” On his arrival in Jerusalem at Christmas, the entire journey replayed itself before his eyes, in the way it happens with a near-death experience. “I was so deeply moved, so full of optimism, that I simply had to cry.”

Optimism, which could be lost in view of the climate catastrophes, the increasing hole in the ozone layer, the disappearing tropical rain forests. Not so for Martin Vosseler. He recites Bertold Brecht: “Once the time has come, when people will help other people, you, however, think of us with forbearance.” He believes whole-heartedly in a change for the better. Even the latest study of the Society for Research into the future “Swissfuture”, which sketches a possible scenario for the year 2024, of individuals, based only on personal success, profit and maximisation of desire, cannot destroy his conviction. He experiences over and over again, that there is a more deep-rooted need in people for community. “That’s why I don’t get upset any more, when elections don’t give the results I would have liked.” It is often the point of departure for a necessary opposition movement. “This insight saves me from despair.”

## **“A miracle will happen“**

The pilgrim has hardly touched base in Switzerland, before he jumps headlong into the next fight: with tent, 2 insulating aluminium-foils, 2 sleeping mats, a hi-tech sleeping bag, a hot water bottle and a gas cooker, Martin Vosseler camps in the cold of January 2004 in a field, next to the river Wiese. This place forms part of a recreational area of the border town Riehen and is the very spot where Germany wants to build a toll-free road between Lörrach and Weil-on-the-Rhine. Martin Vosseler wants to prevent this by going on hunger strike, or fasting, as he prefers to call it. The road will cut through a flood plain forest with many rare species of bird, which are threatened with extinction. Other than that, 120 trees should fall victim to the road.

His opponent, Wolfgang Dietz, the mayor of Weil-on-the-Rhine, sees things differently. Firstly, he believes to be in the right, because in 1977, Switzerland signed a valid state-contract, which guarantees the construction of the road. Secondly, he doubts that this location can be classified as a flood plain forest, and thirdly, he claims that only 30 rather than 120 trees need to be felled. “The Basel City Gardeners told us that 120 trees are to be felled,” counters Martin Vosseler.

In order to prevent the construction of the road, he organised a protest in the Basel market square. Two thousand people demonstrated with him. He is not unduly concerned, that for many people, he has become a hero figure, with which they can identify and in which they place their hope. Every person needs a role model, who at a certain point in time experiences and formulates what they cannot experience for themselves at that time. “Naturally that puts

me under a certain pressure,” he adds. Some people place him on a pedestal, from which others try to knock him down. “It’s like walking on a tightrope.”

After 26 days of fasting and with the support of the Basel authorities as well as cabinet minister Moritz Leuenberger, Vosseler achieves a provisional construction-block. However, in the ensuing discussions at the beginning of April, the Basel authorities concede defeat. Construction of the road will proceed. At least, in consideration of nesting birds, they have agreed to postpone the felling of the trees until the end of August at the earliest. Martin Vosseler wants to use this breathing space to discuss with his fellow activists what further action should be taken.\*\*\*

Martin Vosseler is underway again: after the transatlantic crossing with a solar-powered catamaran, he will walk for 6 months from Los Angeles to Washington, starting in May 2007. The action should bring renewed vigour to the energy-change concept we are striving for – not by pure coincidence in the country “which burns the most energy”. Environmental activist Vosseler is optimistic about the future. His optimism comes from the successes of the past 20 years. He has collected many of these successful “living planet projects” in the form of newspaper articles in his “miracle folders”, which in the meantime take up enough space to fill a 3m long shelf. We are in a phase of development, which in 20 years will be much more noticeable than it is today. “However, we need a miracle; and if we continue in our endeavours, I believe firmly that the miracle will happen.”

**Box:**

**Energy forum «sun21»**

In 1997, together with professor Andreas Nidecker and the local politician for Basel Christoph Eymann, Martin Vosseler founded the organisation “sun21”. Today Vosseler is the business manager of “sun21”. The declared aims of the organisation: active engagement for sustainable energy usage, to bring the energy-change to stand, and to stop completely the use of oil, gas and nuclear power. Vosseler is convinced, that if the entire world-economy were not driven by oil, and if fewer people profited from this oil-economy, then the aims of “sun21” could be achieved already today. The organisation has hosted the annual energy forum “sun21” in Basel since 1998. Prominent guests such as Klaus Töpfer and Al Gore have spoken at the forum in the past. Other events taking place include diverse workshops and shows and the presentation of the Pegasus Prize (Swiss mobility prize).

\*\*\* N.B. Martin Vosseler: We didn’t manage to save the nature area. Despite an action to protect the trees along the Wiese, they were cut down on 6.2.2006. A further hunger-strike and an attempt to find an alternative viable solution with a tunnel, failed due to lack of willingness to enter into discussions on the part of the German authorities. The bridge over the Wiese is currently under construction.