



An outdoor boot from Swedish footwear brand Lundhags made from Terracare leather from Lederfabrik Josef Heinen.

Credit: Lundhags

Opposing points of view



A prominent sports industry media company in Germany, Ebner Media, recently invited leather manufacturer Thomas Heinen to take part in a discussion with a senior representative of campaign group PETA. Most people in the industry are aware of the visceral anti-leather stance that PETA takes in many of its public statements and from the outset Ebner Media billed the discussion, part of a series it produces called the SAZSports Podcast, as controversial.

It may have wanted sparks to fly, but the resulting conversation was calm, dignified and constructive, which will surprise no one who knows Thomas Heinen. He runs Lederfabrik Josef Heinen GmbH, the company that his family set up in Wegberg, North Rhine-Westphalia, in 1891, and is currently first vice-chairman of Germany's national leather industry association, VDL. He has long been a thoughtful contributor to industry initiatives and was an early pioneer of using labels, certification and skillful storytelling to give footwear brands and other customers the reassurance they need about leather's circularity and

Promising controversy, a sports media group in Germany recently set up a discussion between senior representatives of campaign group PETA and the country's leather sector. Respectful dialogue won the day.

sustainability credentials. Lederfabrik Josef Heinen launched an in-house sustainable leather brand, Terracare, almost 15 years ago. It says Terracare defines its production standards and represents a commitment to making high-quality finished leather in an environmentally friendly, resource-efficient and socially compatible way, using local raw materials.

“There has been a huge number of changes for the better, in recent years; the leather industry has achieved an incredible amount.”

THOMAS HEINEN

Song of liberty

In a spirit of respect and openness, Mr Heinen explained all of this in the discussion with the campaign group, which was represented by Johanna Fuoss, its spokesperson in Germany for clothing and textiles. Curiously, Ms Fuoss opened with a celebration of her organisation’s success in helping to make fur coats and collars a thing of the past in fashion. In response, Thomas Heinen offered a breakdown of the four-week process involved in sourcing raw material from meat companies and traders, using it to make finished leather and delivering the leather to customers. Clearly fur is not part of that.

Next, Ms Fuoss talked about her concerns about restrictions to animals’ freedom and their ability to live in their own “social structures”. She said humans really only know our own world and our own emotions and, therefore, cannot really have a clear idea of what animals experience. She confirmed that, in her opinion, livestock farming, feedlots and leather production are all wrong. In principle, she opposed keeping pets at home too because, she said, too many are kept in conditions that are not “species-appropriate” and the animals are made to be unfairly dependent on people. “We wouldn’t like to live with such a lack of freedom,” she said.

Her organisation’s short-term aim is to educate the public on the unfairness of all this and to encourage people to make animals’ lives as free and fair as possible. Then, in response to a question from the host, Florian Bergener, she acknowledged that an immediate mass liberation of livestock and pets would not be a good idea because the extent to which these animals have become dependent on humanity would make it impossible for them to survive. Her “big vision”, she confirms, is that, in time, no animals will live in captivity. But she added, intriguingly, that she did not like the contribution that stray street cats and dogs make to the current challenge because new litters come along too frequently; targeted sterilisation programmes are her suggested solution for this.

Respectful people

This, too, has little connection to the work that Thomas Heinen and other leather manufacturers do day in day out. He politely pointed out that the desire for nourishment is inherent in all living beings and that human beings were no different. “A lion will eat a gazelle without thinking about it, just as a snake will eat a mouse,” he said. “People are part of this chain too. But it is still very important to treat animals well. I believe slaughter can be respectful and appropriate.”

He accepted that processing animals in abattoirs for food is never going to be an attractive spectacle, but he insisted it was entirely feasible for this activity to take place with respect. “Farmers, people in the meat industry and tanners are not blood-thirsty brutes running around with knives in our hands,” he pointed out. “We are respectful people and



Managing director of Lederfabrik Josef Heinen and vice-chairman of German leather industry association VDL, Thomas Heinen.

Credit: Lederfabrik Josef Heinen

everyone one of us has an interest in these processes working correctly, not least because this is important for achieving high-quality products. No one has an interest in allowing the animals to suffer.”

Hunter-gatherers

Ms Fuoss said she found “very difficult” any comparison between animals in the wild and even our ancient ancestors hunting for food and consumers today having access to meat through farmers raising captive animals solely for that purpose. In the past, the animals people hunted had freedom; livestock today has none, she argued. At the same time, other sources of protein are available to us now.

Of course it’s true that most people do not hunt their own food any more, Mr Heinen said in response, but it is also true that most people who choose not to eat meat, among whom he includes himself, do not spend their time growing the plants that they will eat. “Most of us have other work to do,” he pointed out. “We have the principle of the division of labour.” He explained that people who have jobs in banks, schools, hospitals or offices would be unable to find time to go to the forest to hunt for food, even if they had the equipment, the knowledge and the skills to do this successfully. Instead, they rely on specialists to bring food to market on a large scale.

However, he went on to say he agreed that large-scale factory farms were not the best way of making that food available. He said he liked the increase in smaller, organic farms on the landscape, adding that he hoped there would be more and more operations like these in the future. They may



PETA's Johanna Fuoss wants footwear brands to stop clinging onto the leather industry. Thomas Heinen says the use of leather makes it perfectly feasible to keep and wear outdoor boots for 15 or 20 years, making these an unbeatably sustainable product.

Credit: Lundhags



not represent exactly what Johanna Fuoss envisages when she talks about allowing animals to live in species-appropriate freedom, he added, but they are on the path towards it and are a far cry from factory farming.

Painful practices

She then began to list instances of poor treatment of cattle that her organisation has highlighted in the past, focusing at first on India and Bangladesh. Then she said investigations in Germany had also revealed poor practice there, including animals going to slaughter before being properly stunned. On bad practices in Asian countries, such as deliberately inflicting pain on the animals to make them move from one place to another, Mr Heinen said no right-thinking person would support them. On the situation in Germany, he said there were outliers there, as well, "as there are everywhere", but that, in Germany, "animal rights are part of our basic laws, laws that are well established and enforced very strictly". He said it was impossible to argue that there were never transgressions, but that for the most part the slaughterhouses stuck to the rules. "If they didn't, they would be closed down," he said.

He went on to say again that, if for no other reason, operatives in abattoirs are careful in their treatment of animals before slaughter because it makes economic sense. "If the animals suffers, the meat can become unusable," he explained. "That's why everyone involved in the process does everything in their power to make sure everything runs properly."

In the right direction

In the face of a dismissive stance from Ms Fuoss regarding certifications and audit systems, which she suggested were rife with not just greenwashing but also "humane-washing", Thomas Heinen said it was important to keep things in perspective. "If you ask me if I have all the answers and a perfect set-up, it's clear that I don't. No one has. But I try continuously to do better and I think my customers do too. We're trying to make things in the best way we can. It's not perfect, but we have come quite a long way."

His strong conviction, he explained, is that it is important to

keep moving in the right direction. "I have been doing this, with my father, for a couple of decades," he said, "and I know there are worlds between the way my father and I work today and the way my grandfather and my great-grandfather worked. There has been a huge number of changes, changes for the better, in recent years. The leather industry has achieved an incredible amount." As an example, he said that many of the chemicals Lederfabrik Josef Heinen uses now are biodegradable; any that are not are on the way out and will soon be replaced by biodegradable products.

Job justified

"What I think is that leather is an extremely useful material," Mr Heinen explained. "The end consumer can keep wearing leather products for a very long time. If you take outdoor footwear as an example, you can wear the same pair for 15 or 20 years without any problem if the product is made of leather." He compared this to polyurethane shoes with a lifespan of between six and 12 months and highlighted the stark difference between the two types of shoe in terms of their impact on the climate. "For me, all of this makes the job of being a tanner and running a tannery absolutely justifiable," he said.

He suggested that Johanna Fuoss was unlikely to agree, and he was right about that. At the end of the discussion, she said hoped that finished-product manufacturers would never accept leather as a sustainable material, no matter how it was made. She added that she wished footwear manufacturers and others would stop "clinging onto this industry" and invest instead in the development of animal-free, plastic-free alternatives.

In his closing remarks, Thomas Heinen made the point that, as long as people eat meat, there will be an important role for skilled people who can produce a high-performance, highly sustainable, versatile material from a by-product of the meat industry. But he said he was glad to have taken part in a discussion in which mutual respect had shone through and expressed hope that the leather industry could maintain a dialogue with PETA and other campaign groups and find common ground with them. 🌱