

## LARGE RETAILER OR SMALL WHOLESALER

*Interview with Marcel van de Ven, owner of Van de Ven Parts Sales and Repairs  
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*There aren't any massive signs saying 'Solex Enterprise Limited' or anything like that on the industrial estate in Sevenum. Sevenum is no metropolis, so the industrial estate is modest too. Yet we certainly didn't end up in a shed where an ageing hippie with a flower in his hair was about to delight the world with a homemade new membrane. Marcel van de Ven (52) runs a highly professional business dealing in Solex parts. So beautifully and comprehensively organised that we can't quite order a whole new Solex, but it's not far off. In the part of a striking building rented from an architect, we find a wonderful blend of pure passion and business acumen, ensuring that traders and enthusiasts of the famous 'spinning wheel' will still be able to keep this iconic moped on the road tomorrow.*

Marcel had been collecting hells for about five years when he decided to count his collection one day: it turned out there were 96 of them. A bit much for a hobby. Time for some streamlining, but not to cut back. Marcel is a baker by trade, and his knowledge of running a bakery is now coming in very handy. A baker earns his money in very small amounts and only by working hard and long hours. On top of that, you have to keep a sharp mind (read: the calculator) on the ball. The hobby became a profession, but delusions of grandeur were and are alien to this industrious entrepreneur. Yet it could have been a substantial business, because when the Hungarian George Safar, together with his manager Laski Kish, ran into difficulties with their Solex factory, Marcel and his older brothers Wil (59) and Jan (64) entered into serious negotiations to purchase the

entire Hungarian factory. At that time, 125 Solexes were ready for shipment to America. It was 2003, and there were quite a few complications with type approval. Tomos Netherlands held the rights, but director Henk Buitter did not stand in the way. During the negotiations, a dispute arose over payment, and the contract was renegotiated several times as new Hungarian demands were made. Ultimately, however, the brothers returned to the Netherlands empty-handed.



*Purchases are made in “medium” quantities*



Brand-new cylinder with a third coil port. The Solex (OTO and later models) runs better than ever with this. The piston rings are 1.5 mm thinner than the originals and feature a locking pin. These pistons are of good quality – unlike the previous ones, which kept seizing up. The whole set for 100 euros – not at all expensive

### **Thinking of buying a small factory?**

It was impossible to negotiate with the Hungarian company in the usual way. The plan was to produce around 5,000 units a year, which could be exported to various countries. However, the factory owner lacked one thing but had plenty of another; he had no money, but pride in abundance... Negotiations had stalled, but Safar knew for certain that his children had to receive four hundred thousand euros, otherwise nothing would come of the deal. So transporting the machinery to the Netherlands was out of the question. And producing there with working capital from the Netherlands? No, then 'someone else' would be in charge. Rent it, then? Turn it into a living museum? Do anything at all? Not a chance; money, and right now, remained the answer. That was when things really came to a standstill for the van den Ven brothers. Shortly afterwards,

the Hungarian business went bankrupt and all the production equipment and assembly lines were scrapped for 18,000 euros (scrap metal price...).



*You can buy a good Solex in Sevenum. He doesn't sell rubbish*



*A spare tank with bracket is available in limited quantities from stock for €50.50 excluding VAT*



*'You really need a motorbike tank guard like that, costing €37.00 excluding VAT,' says Marcel. 'It keeps your tank and ignition cover intact, and it looks better.'*

Strangely enough, we did manage to buy parts that were still in sufficient stock. We were also able to resume production of various components. Most of the moulds needed to make these were still available. However, incorporating improvements designed by the van den Ven brothers themselves (such as on the crankcase in the photo below) was not (yet?) possible. An expensive undertaking, the 3D plastic prototype shown. (Editor's note: within a few years, the improved crankcases could be purchased from Marcel at an affordable price.)

The machines were gone. From then on, it was all manual work again, in a different location. When purchasing parts, they managed not to offend the Hungarian's 'pride' whilst still paying in advance. Exclusivity for quite a few countries was also easily arranged. And that 'sense of honour' works positively again, as Safar and Kish have adhered to it impeccably to this day.





*These curved handlebars are really lovely; the previous range was too thick.*

Conversely, the factory managers are still trying to assemble complete Solexes themselves, but when certain parts, such as pistons, run out, it is Marcel who has them made. He delivers them back to what remains of the factory; there are still five men working there – from time to time. This creates a balance between the Dutch and the Hungarians. The in-house production of parts takes place, on an increasingly sliding scale, under Van de Ven's supervision. By now, this is no longer in Hungary, but partly even in-house, with the brothers Wil and, above all, Jan teaching Marcel everything. Just as they did when they were still little boys...



*For €15.25 (excl. VAT), your Solex will stand securely on a new stand*

### **Not much from China**

The fact that the world's largest country is involved in the production of parts has now become 'the norm'. Nevertheless, most Van de Ven Solex parts come from outside India (20 per cent), primarily from Europe (the remaining 80 per cent, in other words). 'And besides that,' says the passionate and enthusiastic hobbyist/manufacturer/repairer, 'I still regularly snap up some great stock. There's still plenty in France, but also right here in our 'own Netherlands'. Bought, made and sometimes improved in-house: you can assemble almost an entire Solex from 'new' parts.



*Alongside the improved cylinder head with a central spark plug, an in-house-manufactured stainless steel engine lifter has also been developed*

The frames and mudguards form the end pieces, which are spaced further apart. The same applies to the crankcases to some extent, and this was an example of a 'not quite there yet' issue. After a great deal of design work on the computer, involving plans for subtle improvements, at the time of writing this article there was still nothing more than a 3D-printed plastic prototype casing, which did not meet the requirements. Because this crucial component does not often break (the casting material actually disintegrates due to contamination and ageing), it was not yet worthwhile at the time to continue after the 10,000 euros that had already been invested. (Editor's note: as mentioned earlier, this has since been achieved and they are available for purchase from Marcel).



*Improved lightweight connecting rod. Thanks to the rib, it is 25 per cent stronger*



*Reaming cylinders is becoming a dying craft. Fortunately, Marcel isn't an old, wrinkled man just yet...*

### **Back down to earth**

Meanwhile, an elderly lady drops by to bring her Solex in for a service. She doesn't want her photo taken, but the 'customer-dealer chat' is old-fashioned and friendly – and in itself almost a museum piece to experience. Of course, there's a row of Solexes in the – okay, showroom – complete with an odd one out: a Simplex with a Berini Ei, or an M 13. Mostly customer models, but there's also one for sale. You're either a Solex shop or you're not. A genuine as-good-as-new Solex costs around 2,000 euros excluding VAT at Marcel's, and we actually find that quite reasonable. For two thousand euros, you're certainly entitled to expect a bit of a treat. The Kreidler on the workbench also reveals that Marcel really does understand more than just 'Solex'. It turns out he has a history with motocross. And to think that we'd planned to tease him beforehand by challenging him with questions about Zündapp... It turns out he even has a rare Zündapp Janus 'bubble car' sitting amongst the bulk packs of Solex parts in the warehouse, waiting for restoration.



*The stainless steel tank bracket was developed by flattening the original piece and CNC-machining it to the perfect shape. Just bend the corners back into place and you have a stainless steel version*



*Oto saddle pads in all colours for €24, excluding VAT. They are also available for the 3800, for €22, excluding VAT*

The trade in new parts is growing steadily and has long been a global business. That is why, in an adjoining warehouse, the concepts of 'efficiency' and 'large-scale' are gradually coming to the fore. A downright amusing example of this is the 'paternoster' that

is, once again, on display in the shop. You sometimes see one of these 'carousel cabinets' in a chemist's or library. At Marcel's, it's full of Solex parts.



*Stainless steel valve adjuster set. For €5.95 excl. VAT, no more hassle*

## **Future**

There isn't a single 'but' in this story, even though, from a business perspective, one is unfortunately so often justified. This is a healthy business with a bright future. Margins are tight, but not too tight; he gets on well with his competitors (and even supplies them. Sometimes he simply refers them to his own suppliers). He can make a living from it, and so the restoration of his mini cars (there's also a Messerschmidt 200) will surely get done one day. The business side of things is absolutely fine, and the human touch is very much present in Sevenum. You'll naturally find yourself wanting a Solex even more if you end up on Helenaveenseweg in Sevenum (near Toverland). So when a 'Koffertje' was offered on Marktplaats for next to nothing... It's still a 'slack-shift' model, without a freewheel clutch. And as for being fast? Nah. That original engine can

go in the display cabinet, because we've also got a non-running Oto model. I'm sure Marcel van de Ven will have some nice bits and bobs for that...



*Brand-new rear mudguards from France. "42 euros" excluding VAT, says the shopkeeper*

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**Information:**

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*Trottoir, parapluie, Rochefort. Which country did those Solexes come from again. . .*