

**A Testimony to the Life of
Dr Ulrich Eduard Loening BA DPhil**

1931 (Berlin) – 2025 (East Lothian)

by friends and colleagues of the

Centre for Human Ecology



A testimony to the life of Dr Ulrich Eduard Loening, as known to us his colleagues of the Centre for Human Ecology (CHE) in the presence of some additional friends and some of his family, and compiled collectively during a memorial gathering conducted “after the manner of Friends” (or Quakers), both in person and online at the Pearce Institute in Govan as a prelude to the Centre’s annual general meeting this day, 10th October 2025.

Ulrich was the CHE’s director at Edinburgh University from 1986, and its emeritus director from 1995 onwards. Most significantly to many of us here tonight, he established and with his colleagues taught, Scotland and the UK’s first postgraduate degree in human ecology - the Master of Science course that ran, initially, from 1992 to 1996 in the University of Edinburgh, and which then branched out into other forms under other scholarly auspices.

Francesca’s Sharing

After a short period of silence during which we drew together in gathered presence, we listened to testimony from Francesca Loening, Ulrich’s wife. Many of us have known her as both his close colleague and a good friend.

Mindful that this gathering is not a substitute for the wider family memorial that is to be held probably next June, Francesca focussed on Ulrich’s approach to human ecology. She illustrated this with a description of an episode from their last of several trips to Bulgaria in late October 1988.

What follows, shared here at her request, is the text that she had prepared and to which she spoke extemporaneously.

In the 1980s Ulrich and I made several visits to Bulgaria to take part in conferences of a newly formed, semi-official organisation called Ecoforum for Peace. At this time Bulgaria was little known to the West – most people knew nothing about Bulgaria except for Varna, its holiday resort on the Black Sea, and this included Ulrich and me.

Ulrich had been introduced to one of the founder members of the Ecoforum in 1981 by a Bulgarian Molecular Biology colleague for whom he had the highest regard and this led to our participating in their conferences in the 1980s.

The last of these was in late October 1988, a conference on the ecological problems of the Danube (dams and nuclear power stations) and it was held on a boat sailing up the Danube from Russé to Passau in Germany.

Opposite Russé, on the Rumanian shore of the Danube is the city of Giurgiu where there were huge chlorine works pouring out toxic fumes. These drifted across the Danube and badly polluted Russé, causing serious health problems. In 1988 a film was made of the air pollution and a women's meeting held to urge the government to action. The film was shown publicly and stirred up so much anger that a 'Committee for the Ecological Defence of Russé' was set up and a first meeting called for 8 March, International Women's Day. A document was drawn up and was signed by about 80 of the people present. But then the authorities moved in, in a heavy-handed way, and banned the 'Committee....'. Those who had signed were dismissed from their jobs and from membership of the Communist Party or their position as students. The Bulgarian government did not want to confront the Rumanians.

Our student friend, who told us all this when we arrived in Sofia, had her PhD cancelled. She implored us to publicise the events at the Danube conference and make it known in the West. This left us with a great responsibility.

Ulrich gave an opening talk at the conference entitled "Obligations imposed by Ecology" which finished by his asking about the Russé affair. His broaching the subject was very disturbing, particularly to the conference organisers who needed to tread a narrow path between

protest and the Party line. They took him aside and told him so. We wondered whether we had done the wrong thing. Ulrich's comments certainly rocked the boat. Later we were talking with a young Bulgarian journalist. Ulrich asked his opinion. He answered, "Don't be mistaken, no one hates you, everybody loves you but no one dares risk saying so."

This protest, which started with an organised women's group was one of the first, maybe the first, protests on environmental issues which led to the overthrow of Communism in the eastern bloc countries a year later in 1989 and in 1990 in the Soviet Union.

It was typical of Ulrich and his fearlessness in speaking out, when necessary, against the abuses and interests of dominant powers.

Open Sharing of our Memories and Appreciation

After Francesca had spoken, Gica played music on her violin, and the gathering then returned to stillness out of which participants, both in-person and online, were invited to offer their memories and appreciations of Ulrich. In all, about twenty people spoke, each with a little silence in between to allow what had been said to settle. What follows can only be a short summary.

We heard testimony to Ulrich's practicality. It was joked that he would take his car to pieces to see why it was still working. He was equally at home in the lab, in the workshop and the garden. In the lab, and in the manner in which he shared his knowledge of molecular biology, he inspired young students, several of whom mentioned how they were astonished at his ability to join the dots from the molecular level, into the human realm, and through into music. He used to say that only science that does not affect humans is pure mathematics, and that all other science must relate to human ecology.

We heard how vital gardening was to both him and Francesca. He deplored the use of chemical weedkillers, even for such instances as controlling ground elder. In one person's sharing, it led to the thought that perhaps the ancient Yew Tree at Ormiston had something in common with ground elder. Perhaps that was a mitigating thought - her garden is now amok with ground elder!

More palatably, we heard how he and Francesca had demonstrated that quinoa could be grown in Scotland. As a result, a hearty crop has just been harvested

from a community garden here in Govan. It is currently drying out in a local airing cupboard, and giving off a magnificent fragrance.

Music was central not only to his and Francesca's life, but also as a metaphor of how they understood ecology. He loved the cello, and played memorably at the wedding when two of his students married each other.

People spoke of his sparkling blue eyes. He taught his students to think outside the box, and like the Ormiston yew tree, the branches of his capacity to inspire extended to places that went beyond imagination, and out into all the ways of being in the world. If we didn't understand something, he would patiently explain it, and these qualities made him a magnet to eminent thinkers.

Francesca would sometimes tease him about name dropping, but the names were there, coming as guests to Ormiston and the Centre for Human Ecology in Edinburgh, for us all to see and hear and learn from.

In abundant testimony we shared how he was a beacon of love, warmth, hospitality, generosity, kindness, humility and definitely, mischief! Several people shared how they had been very lucky and blessed to have known the Loening family, and in the ways in which they shared their home. One said that she was very grateful for such a gift to a young person. Others testified that such an ethos is something they too now replicate in their homes.

Even this year, into his last days, he was absolutely ecstatic about an experiment that he was running. He energised us as students and as friends. He would say, "We still have so much work to do," and that is where he leaves us.

Ulrich's was a flame that is passed around. We will keep it going, through our love and devotion. And we will miss him terribly, but at another level, "he's just here".