

CENTENARY OF THE BIRTH OF MATTI S. MARTELA, A PIONEER OF THE FINNISH FURNITURE INDUSTRY**From Somero to the world**

The birth of Martela – originally Tehokaluste Oy – is straight out of a modern start-up textbook. The founder Matti S. Martela (1913–1987) was an entrepreneur with many talents. He had a burning desire to create new things, great curiosity and a sharp eye for changing trends. He was a veteran of the Second World War and had already established his first businesses in the saw mill and furniture industries. During Finland's post-war reconstruction period, Martela, who was already the father of four children, established a new company that was to become the Finnish market leader in the design and sale of office furniture.

His first customer was Veikko Vennamo, then director of the Department for Settlement Affairs at the Ministry of Agriculture. Vennamo turned out to be a rather big customer for the company. Vennamo initially ordered 50 office desks and before even one desk had been delivered, the ordered was doubled to 100. It was a flying start for a new furniture company! High quality and prompt delivery became the hallmarks of Tehokaluste, and the government was one of its key customers for a long time. Another hallmark was standardisation, which had been adopted from Germany. Martela was the first in Finland to adopt a modern standard paper size in the product design, for instance.

Everyone in the family was involved in the company, but always out of choice. But with both parents working at Martela, vacations would often include visits to places that were of interest to the company.

"We would often stop at a factory and dad would tour its production facilities while the rest of us would venture into the nearest village or visit the nearest sights," says Heikki Martela, the company's current Managing Director and Matti S. Martela's son.

Heikki S. Martela was never interested in hobnobbing with the business elite of his time. As a businessman, he was interested in facts and prices. Unlike so many others, he didn't visit President Kekkonen at his official residence although Heikki Martela does recall a visit by a government minister.

"Dad kept political ideology and business apart. He was not motivated primarily by money, either. What mattered more to him was the creation of something new. Martela was also a patriot: he considered Finnish values and Finland's development to be critical issues in the 1950s," says Heikki Martela.

**Martela Oyj**

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He also felt it was important to take care of his family: he wanted to set up a Tehokaluste factory in Somero where he lived and in the early days the company's personnel included quite a few cousins and other relations. However, things did not work out for Somero. Instead, Veikko Helle, an influential social democrat and the municipal manager of Vihti, aroused his interest in Nummela, which is part of Vihti, and where Martela eventually centralised its manufacturing. The growing company also set up a factory Kitee in Northern Karelia, which was a municipality designated for special development aid.

"Dad and I went to the opening ceremony of the Kitee plant in the 1970s. I can still remember how proud he was to be able to provide jobs, and that ideas could be turned into work. Of course the investment was prompted by government and municipal subsidies, and tax concessions with the aim of creating jobs in the area."

You can't always win but you can always learn!

Matti S. Martela's curiosity and ability to see things in a new light made many things possible.

"He was always eager to try something new. We would visit fairs, travel abroad looking for inspiration, and experiment. Sometimes this led to great success stories such as the Kilta chair and the open office concept, but there were lemons as well. Dad remained optimistic, however, and accepted that mistakes were a part of the learning process."

Martela's open mind and enthusiasm for new ideas led to the first genuinely internationally successful piece of Finnish office furniture: the Kilta conference chair. The chair was designed by Olli Mannermaa, it was originally manufactured from plywood, but a new patented method of using reinforced polystyrene enabled a revolutionary new way of producing the chair and gave the designer a lot more freedom.

Kilta was the first upholstered chair with a molded plastic shell combining the benefits of wood and plastic technologies. It came very popular in Finland but was manufactured under license as far away as Japan. Mannermaa's timeless design has made Kilta a classic that continues to serve its purpose. It is both a popular office chair and desired vintage for home interiors. In fact, there is no other 1950s public space classic in Finnish design history that is based on innovative technology which has remained in production.

Tehokaluste was renamed Martela in 1974.

"Family involvement is a value that my father brought to the company which has become part of its DNA," says Heikki Martela.

"We are a listed company first and foremost but the family's commitment and interest in developing Martela have been very strong from one generation to the next. Dad influenced us predominately through the example he set, not

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by telling us what he expected us to do. This business and this company create a very interesting combination. When I was a young man I was sure I would never work at Martela but then... facts and working with innovation have drawn me to the company, too," says Heikki Martela. He became the company's Managing Director in 2002.

Although Matti S. Martela was an open-minded and innovative man, he was very fact-oriented. He never allowed imagination to cloud the truth.

"You could say he was totally honest. He expected people to keep their promises, to keep their work and not twist words in contracts. The entire business was based on keeping your word. This was really his personality. A competitor once made false accusations about Martela that ended up in a Finnish tabloid. He never bought the paper again after that, even though the paper later printed a correction. Matti Martela always did what he thought was the right thing. Such principles have not been always in fashion as circumstances and business interests change."

Another thing that was important to Matti S. Martela has also fallen somewhat out of fashion: a proper hat. Matti Martela, already at an advanced age, went to buy a car with his son Pekka. He visited a Mercedes dealer where he was shown the latest top-of-the-line model. Martela sat behind the wheel but noticed that his hat pressed against the roof. He did not buy the car.

Facts:

Matti S. Martela founded Tehokaluste in 1945 with Henrik Virkkunen, Unto Eskola, Jonne Jahnukainen and Swante Nurmiranta, all of whom had business degrees, and Wladimir Rumjantsev, who was an architect.

Matti S. Martela was the company's Managing Director from 1945 to 1976 and served on its Board of Directors from 1945 to 1986.

High resolution picture can be downloaded from the Martela picture bank:

<http://picture.martela.com/folder/441/16%20Marketing%20Material/04%20People>

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