



Hans Joachim Laue

## What Times... (Part II)

In his five-volume “Diary of Bookbinding and Print Finishing” (in German: „Tagebuch der Buchbinderei und Druckweiterverarbeitung“), which he published himself, [Hans Joachim Laue](#) a trade journalist who was born in 1943 and has been retired for several years, looks back on 500 years of the graphic arts trade and printing industry. In two blogs, he lets you take a look at his valuable reference work, focusing on the pioneers Friedrich von Martini, August Kolbus, Hans Müller and Kurt Stahl. Whether atomic bombs are tested or people put their feet on the moon, that didn't stop company founders from going their own way. Thus, the Muller Martini brand also conceals a pioneering spirit in various facets.

Let's bring this to mind: On February 1, 1972, the Muller Martini brand family was formed from two good names. But behind this brand are hidden other personalities who sought and found their way in idiosyncratic times. In the first part a week ago, I told you about Friedrich von Martini and August Kolbus. In part two, we now remember Hans Müller and Kurt Stahl.

### **Hans Müller**

It was the dawn of a new era when 30-year-old [Hans Müller](#) (1916–2013) became an entrepreneur together with a comrade from his military service from April 1, 1946. The computer age began in the U.S. Army with the „monster“ ENIAC, the UN held its first General Assembly, the Nuremberg Trials occupied world public opinion more than other topics, and VW began to make history with the series production of the „Beetle“.

That the company's founder Hans Müller would also create a success story – from a workshop to a global corporation – was neither planned nor foreseeable in the year the company was founded. After his studies, he had worked as an engineer in industry and as a technical teacher at a vocational school. When I interviewed him in his 80th year and asked him about the reasons for his risky self-employment so soon after the end of the war, he replied: „It was certainly a question of ambition and the urge to do something new and better than what had existed before. I also wanted to try out what I had learned on my own responsibility, to apply it and to build something up. Looking back, I can see that I was never afraid of problems, and there were plenty of them to solve.“

In the first order book, the order for a gearbox with V-belt drive wheel was recorded on March 6, 1946 under order number 1000, to be delivered by April 30, 1946. On March 25, 1946, the order for six HM5 stitching machines was recorded under numbers 1002 to 1007, and one month later, the order for an HM40 stitching machine was recorded under number 1009 (the abbreviation HM stands for Hans Müller). Delivery of five machines was scheduled for the end of August and one each for the end of May and June. While the HM5 was used for stapling cardboard boxes, the HM40 was intended for stapling together chipboard boxes – for example, for transporting the Valais apricot harvest.

### **By bicycle, bus and train to customers**

In a circular letter dated May 7, 1946, addressed to all cardboard box factories, the Müller company advertised its flat stitching machines, which were at the top of the production range. At the top of the letterhead, the business activity is imprinted as „Carton and wood stitching machines / gear manufacturing / woodworking machines“.

Hans Müller was the sole designer and salesman during the first four years, sometimes also mechanic and assembler. The trade with woodworking machines was an attempted additional mainstay. He held patents in gear construction. He traveled to customers by bicycle, bus and train.

As a printing contractor, he came into contact with the graphic arts industry early on and recognized the technical backlog. That was the challenge for him: to simplify or replace manual work, to mechanize and automate. With the now legendary B-1 booklet-making wire stitching machine, which remained in the production program for several decades, the course was set in the direction of print finishing in the same year, 75 years ago. Hans Müller played a decisive role in shaping the process of technical change in this area.

### **1946: Atomic tests**

The Second World War is over, but the damage is still visible for a long time. Never again war is the motto in many places. Reconstruction is the order of the day. Insofar as the citizen hears it at all on the radio, sees it in the newsreel or reads it in the daily newspaper, after the devastating dropping of atomic bombs in August 1945 on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, people in Central Europe „shut themselves off“ from the news of atomic tests at Bikini Atoll. On July 26, 1946, the second nuclear test takes place there. The bomb detonates 30 meters underwater, sending 2 million tons of water into the air and forming a mushroom-shaped explosion visible from afar. Ostensibly, the goal of the test series is „the welfare of mankind and the end of all world wars.“ Although the long-term effects of radioactive radiation have not yet been researched, the military purpose technology for generating electricity is being developed further. The euphoria has faded, but the problems remain to this day.

### **Kurt Stahl**

When Stahl & Co. founded its subsidiary VBF Vereinigte Buchbindereimaschinenfabriken

GmbH in 1969, the Stahl brand was synonymous with folding machines in the graphic arts industry. No wonder, since the company was founded by [Kurt Stahl](#) (1910–1991) and [Adolf Döpfert](#) (1919–2007) in Ludwigsburg on June 1, 1949, 10,000 machines had already been built. The Basic Law of the new Federal Republic of Germany had been promulgated only a week before the company was founded, and the currency reform towards the D-Mark had already taken place a year earlier.

In the first company domicile, Kurt Stahl's parents' house, graphic machines were initially repaired. Inspired by recurring customer requests, the Swabian tinkerer Kurt Stahl began designing a folding machine, which he also built himself. As his daughter Margarete Stahl wrote in the 1979 chronicle, the production of folding machines began in 1951 and filled a gap in the market that brought the company a steep rise. In the early years, the customers were regional. The decisive factor was then the worldwide use of the sales and service network of Heidelberger Druckmaschinen AG.

The aim of the subsidiary VBF in Iggersheim (now a district of Bad Mergentheim), founded in 1969, was to supply book production lines. Individual types such as hanging and press-in machines and flow three-knife trimmers made a start before the first book production line could be delivered in 1972. But the markets for off- and inline hardcover book production demanded more, so that in early 1995 book machine manufacturers from Switzerland, Italy and Germany joined forces in Lugano to form the synergy association BTG Book Technology Group with a worldwide sales and service organization. However, three years later, this alliance dissolved again. Muller Martini acquired VBF Book Technology from Stahl and expanded its print finishing portfolio with hardcover production systems.

### **1969: Moon Landing**

On the night of July 20-21, 1969, I too – like 500 million people around the world – sit in front of the television set and watch the first moon landing. The screen diagonal is tiny compared to today's TV sets. From the live transmission I see black and white, blurred, distorted pictures by means of indoor antenna. It is the ambition of the U.S. to trump the lead of the Soviet competition in space. Apollo 11 commander Neil Armstrong sets foot on the lunar surface and utters the phrase: „A small step for a human, but a giant leap for mankind.“ (A small step for a human, but a giant leap for mankind.) Meanwhile, the competitive mindset at Stahl/VBF is also a motivator to move into new territory in 1969.

And the moral of the story? Surely it's that in good times and bad, you have ideas, you can innovate, start companies and launch projects. Both the willingness to compromise and the constant reorientation require courage, resources, employees and markets – namely customers like you!

Yours

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*The five-volume „Diary of Bookbinding and Print Finishing“ is available from Muller Martini customer [BoD Book on Demand](#), Norderstedt (Germany), or from any other bookstore (stationary or online).*