

# Václav Klement – who was the founder of the famous car company?

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**Abstract.** *The ŠKODA AUTO belongs to one of the oldest car manufacturers in the world. This year, it will commemorate the 120th anniversary of the beginning of vehicle production in the city of Mladá Boleslav. In the last quarter of 20th century it has regained the prominence which it lost in the era of a rigid socialist economy. The reputation and product quality of the car maker have made a strong upswing and today ŠKODA is one of the best known companies in the country and also tops surveys for the most popular employer. The company currently employs around 25 thousand people.*

*In 1895, when the firm **Laurin & Klement** started trading, it employed seven people, including its two founders, Václav Laurin (1865–1930) and Václav Klement (1868–1938). The company originally set out to repair and manufacture bicycles. Václav Klement was a bookseller by trade, and also an exceptionally talented manager whose flair and diligence enabled him to build the largest car manufacturer in Austria-Hungary.*

## Keywords

Klement, Václav, Laurin, automotive industry, car factory, Laurin & Klement, Škoda, manager, director, founder.

## 1. Václav Klement

Václav Klement (16.10. 1868–13.8. 1938) was born in Velvary and, due to the humble family conditions, could not attend university studies. Thanks to the understanding of his teacher, he was not forced to pursue the blacksmithing trade which was the calling his stepmother wished for him, but rather transferred to a trade school for booksellers in the city of Slaný. Since his youth, he was a passionate member of the Sokol movement, a tourist and soon after a cyclist, but also a great patriot. The company archives contain a number of documents from the time of his bookselling activities in Mladá Boleslav which show

that he offered books at discounts for Sokol meets (e.g. “The Little Book of Patriotic Aphorisms”).

It is not known when exactly Klement moved to Mladá Boleslav. In later years, he claimed either 1887 or 1889. He was employed by and then managed a store owned by the Novotný family which traded in books, paper and musical instruments in Železná street. He did so well, in fact, that in 1891 he bought the whole store. He soon started to also repair and sell bicycles there, but presumably did not report this business to the Mladá Boleslav authorities and a few local citizens filed a complaint against him for trading without a licence (1893). He married in 1894 and, what is of more importance to this region, had a falling out with the affiliate office of the Dresden company Seidel und Naumann in Ústí nad Labem regarding the repair of his nearly new bicycle of the same brand. According to the legend handed down until this day, the impulse behind his decision to start his own company was spurred by the following disagreement. He had sent in his claim in the Czech language, but it was sternly answered in an arrogant reply in German which angered him but also inspired him to try out his own hand in bicycle repairs and production. He was unsure of the technical side of the matter, but deeply believed in himself in the management and business aspects of the plan. According to one source, he was probably already acquainted at that time with Václav Laurin, a mechanic from Turnov who came to Mladá Boleslav at his request. According to another version, they met only after Laurin left his previous business partner (Kraus&Laurin, Turnov) in 1895 and moved to Mladá Boleslav.

The reader may now perhaps suspect how the story continued to evolve. However, their collective beginnings were far from easy. They repeatedly applied for a manufacturing licence which was initially turned down by the city council, then awarded, but at the same time coincided with a fine issued to messrs L&K for trading without a licence. In fact, the celebrated year of 1895 is in a sense irrelevant since L&K as a company were first officially entered in the Register of Companies in 1897.

The bicycles did not sell well at the beginning and the economical situation of the company was far from ideal.

Klement even had to repeatedly plea with a wealthy local lady for financial support along the lines of “I am again left without resources but will surely return everything by Monday.” This situation makes the following developments all the more interesting. Due to his hard-working, extremely committed but also pedantic attitude, he succeeded in building the largest automobile manufacturer in Austria-Hungary and attaining great wealth. He had no children and bequeathed his assets to many institutions. The Mladá Boleslav orphanage (founded by Klement himself) received 600,000 Crowns (in the period currency), and he also donated 100,000 Crowns to poor students in Velvary, as well as 200,000 Crowns to poor students in Mladá Boleslav, and 200,000 Crowns to the National Technical Museum (which also received a collection of motorcycles, cars and brochures), etc.

Václav Klement was very hard on himself and requested the same personal approach from everyone else. He was a very competent organiser and was very modest, but at the same time almost unpleasantly thorough. There are many tales depicting these traits; one of them about his personal driver who ordered a bread roll to go with his soup, while the factory owner was content with a simple slice of bread. The waiter was duly paid by Klement and even received a royal tip for the driver’s meal, but the bread roll had to be paid by the driver separately. Another time, Klement saw an apprentice arriving on a twenty-year-old single-cylinder L&K motorcycle. He immediately purchased it from the boy and had the money paid out to him on the spot. However, later on in the day he came upon the boy as he was sitting around, bragging and not working and, without further ado, dealt him a slap in the face. The archives even show a detailed check from a hotel in Paris which contains lines written in and crossed out in different ink and hand writing. It is easy to imagine who set the record straight as far as the supplied services were concerned.

All of these characteristics brought him respect, but in the post-war period which did not favour business in general and wealthy and famous personalities even less so, also a label of an antisocial individual who enforced his will on workers. An altogether forgotten chapter is his membership in the Rotary Club. (The Rotarians are a world-wide organisation of business and professional leaders who provide humanitarian services to their fellow citizens and promote high ethical standards in all vocations.)

Václav Klement shared a close friendship throughout his whole life with his business partner Václav Laurin, which remained strong even in the times of their more or less formal position of honorary councillors to Škoda Works. And while Klement tried to stay active into the 1920s, for example by setting out on a long tour of the United States, Laurin receded into retirement.

## 1.1 Václav Laurin

Václav Laurin (27. 9. 1865–4. 12. 1930), a modest and very talented technician whose ingenuity, inventions and experiments laid down the foundations of L&K as an automotive manufacturer. In 1907–1925 he was the technical director of the company, but his influence over actual product development eventually diminished. However, he dedicated his whole life to hard work for and on behalf of their own company. He even sacrificed his weekends to the factory and spent time with his family by taking trips in new models. He remained in the shadow of his business partner and was sidelined to a certain extent, not only as a matter of speech, but even literally. The few surviving photos of Laurin show him standing a few steps to the side or in the back while Klement is always in the centre of attention.

## 1.2 L&K

In the end, however, we can fairly state that the L&K abbreviation stands not only for the marque itself, but also for the friendship between the two partners which stood the test of time throughout their 35 years together.

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