

**ECONOMIC PROFESSIONAL, INDUSTRY MANAGER AND MINISTER**  
**JÜRI KRAFT (6.01.1935–15.03.2023)**  
*IN MEMORIAM*

**Jüri Kraft** (6 January 1935, Kasepää Rural Municipality, Tartu County – 15 March 2023, Tallinn) was an active economic professional in Estonia, an effective head of industrial enterprises and former statesman of the Estonian S.S.R. who left our midst at the age of 88.

Jüri Kraft graduated from the Mustvee I Secondary School in 1954 and from the Faculty of Economics of the Tartu State University in 1959.

He was the director of the Sangar Sewing Factory in 1963–1972 and director of the Vilhelmine Klementi Sewing Factory in 1972–1974. In 1974–1977, Jüri Kraft was the Deputy Minister of Light Industry of the Estonian S.S.R. and in 1977–1988 the Minister of Light Industry of the Estonian S.S.R. He had no successor –if there is no ministry, no minister is necessary either. His own predecessor had been a Russian who spoke no Estonian, and the working language of the Ministry was Russian.

As a member of the Congress of People’s Deputies of the U.S.S.R. (1989–1991), Kraft actively participated in the public disclosure of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact.

In the last years of his life, Jüri Kraft actively participated in charity work. For years he was a member of the Council and Board of the Tallinn St. Mary’s Cathedral Congregation of the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church (EELC) and a member of the Council of the EELC Church Foundation and an active donor. He regarded the protection and preservation of the Estonian cultural heritage very important.

Since 1988, in connection with the reorganisation of different ministries related to industry, Jüri Kraft was the First Deputy Chairman of the State Industry Committee of the Estonian S.S.R. 1989–1993 he was the President of the Estar State-owned Light Industry and Trade Group, since 1993 the Chairman of the Supervisory Board. In 1991 he was one of the founders of the Estonian Coalition Party and remained its member until the party was liquidated in 2001.

The phenomenon of Jüri Kraft consisted in having leadership skills all his life. He was 28 years old when he became the director of the Sangar Sewing Factory. His energy took him to take responsibility for the whole light industry of Estonia from Kommunaar to Kreenholm. Thanks to Jüri Kraft the brands Sangar and Marat became very successful and popular. The enterprises subordinated to the Ministry had approximately 40,000 employees. He transferred manufacturing to basic principles of market economy during the Soviet period. During the Singing Revolution he was one of the deputies of the Supreme Soviet (1980–1990) who signed the Declaration of Sovereignty of Estonia on 16 November 1988. Some saw him as the Prime Minister of free Estonia but he declined. The former Minister of Light Industry of the Estonian S.S.R. who had great merits was active in light industry business almost until now. After regaining of independence of Estonia, Jüri Kraft was the major shareholder in the Sangar (since 1992 also Chairman

of the Supervisory Board), Mivar (since 1995 also Chairman of the Supervisory Board), Marat and Estar companies and held shares in several other companies.

1980s were a decade of fundamental changes, the development of the economy of the Soviet Union stagnated. While Mikhail Gorbachev gave passionate speeches, no major actions were taken. We certainly have to note that it was the *perestroika* and *glasnost* initiated by M. Gorbachev that enabled us (like also other Baltic countries) to regain our independence. However, Minister Jüri Kraft who had achieved so much wanted to carry out positive changes. With economic success the life of Jüri Kraft did not get easier: In 1987, Karl Vaino invited Mikhail Gorbachev to Estonia to get praised for the promotion of perestroika. People had really been given more freedom, private tailors, hairdressers and taxis were in business, cotton candy was sold on every street corner.

In Moscow, at the Congress of the People's Deputies of the U.S.S.R, Jüri Kraft was appointed to the post of a member of the Budgetary Committee. When the situation of domestic policy had become anxious in the Baltic States and in the Soviet Union, he had to explain to the committee for several times about what is that the Estonians want and what is the economic self-management IME (Self-managing Estonia).

**During the hot August days in 1991**, these epoch-making times, it was not difficult for most Estonians to decide which side to take. Jüri Kraft was no exception either. His father had participated in the War of Independence as a volunteer and the son took it for granted to follow father's footsteps.

In many fields of activities, active actions make people tired. The Estonian economy did not show particular signs of success either, many shortcomings became evident. Also Jüri Kraft decided to withdraw after regaining of independence of Estonia.

During that period, Jüri Kraft was directly or indirectly as the owner of his holding companies related to more than ten enterprises operating mainly in the field of light industry. In August 1992 he established the company AS Kraft & Pojad: Jüri Kraft owns 50% and his two sons each 25%.

To Jüri Kraft and his brother, lands of their ancestors on the coast of Lake Peipus were restituted. They built a farm there to raise beef cattle. The once legendary industry manager Jüri Kraft now often lived in Spain in the autumn, having moved mountains in the economy for 60 years and given an impetus to the regaining of independence of Estonia. He spent his retirement years also in his summer home at Lahemaa.

Jüri Kraft as an active economic professional often participated in annual winter workshops, annual conferences of the Estonian Economic Association (EMS) after Estonia regained its independence. The I Annual Conference of the Estonian Economic Association which had operated in the Soviet period was held on 20 April 1984 with the participation of 110 economists. Annual EMS conferences have been held since 2006. For instance, the V Annual Conference of EMS took place in Viljandi on 29–30 January 2010. The undersigned had an interesting conversation with Jüri Kraft there for almost

one and a half hours at the coffee table on the morning of the second day, including on the subject of the economic experiment of light industry<sup>1</sup>.

Jüri Kraft as an alumnus of the Faculty of Economics of the University of Tartu participated actively also in the events organised by the Hermes Non-profit Organisation of alumni (established on 9 May 1997) in the premises of the Faculty, in the Assembly Hall of the main building of the university or conference hall of the library. He had also substantial and topical questions to ask from presenters, and had initiative to participate intriguingly in the discussions. I remember that Jüri Kraft often emphasised in his speeches: “Production and industry are the basis for the economy”, and brought good examples from his practical work in the economy. He was so right and it is topical also now.

During his student years, Jüri Kraft was an excellent folk dancer and participated actively in cultural life also later. He was a patron of the brass band festivals organised at Torma and invited well-known Estonian singers to sing in the church there. He published books of great importance for our cultural history and made concerts of our best opera singers available to the public. Jüri Kraft was also the man who revived the Estonian Culture Film.

Acknowledgements received by Jüri Kraft:

- In 1985 Jüri Kraft received the state award of the Estonian S.S.R. He was given credit as the implementer of market economy reforms in Estonian light industry.
- In 2005 the Order of the White Star, Third Class, of the Republic of Estonia.
- In 2007 the Order of Honour, First Class, of the Estonian Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the Order of Honour, Second Class, of the International Congress of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs (ICIE).
- In 2012 the Cross of Merit, Third Class, of the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church.
- In 2019 the Lifetime Work Award of the Entrepreneur of the Year of Estonia.
- In 2021 the St. Mary’s Medal of the Tallinn St. Mary’s Cathedral Congregation.

Active economic professional, effective head of industrial enterprises, former successful minister and finally also entrepreneur, farmer and pensioner Jüri Kraft was a man who believed up to the end that difficulties are there to be overcome. He was a right Estonian man. Honour and glory to him!

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<sup>1</sup> The undersigned had been directly connected with the economic experiment of light industry, being the Head of the Department of Economic Experiment and Economic Studies of the Mainor Office of the Ministry of Light Industry from 18 June 1984 to 5 January 1987. The Director of Mainor Ülo Pärnits (28 June 1936, Kudina Rural Municipality – 21 December 2016) made me the proposal to take this post at the beginning of May 1984.

Two and a half years of work with the economic reforms of light industry were an interesting time, besides, this was the second time for me to participate in the economic restructuring in Estonia on the level of the Soviet Union (the first time /1978–1981/ was related to regional aspects of economic activities of enterprises of meat and dairy industry).

Jüri Kraft was mourned by his wife Marje and sons Gunnar and Märt with families. But certainly also by many people who had had contacts with him during his life.

At Pirita-Kose, in March 2023

Matti Raudjärv

(Cooperation partner of esteemed Jüri Kraft from the days of Mainor, Chief Editor of the journal and member of the Estonian Economic Association, *emeritus* of the area of Social Studies of the University of Tartu, visiting professor of several Georgian universities)