

## Kaj Bern: Remembrance 1932-2018

It was about 20 years ago I first met Kaj at a meeting of the Blue Ridge VCOA Chapter. Slight build, hunched over, gray bearded and a smoker's gravelly voice. His ride was a Volvo 245 5-door wagon with a zillion miles on the clock. (Recall those 100K, 200K 300K, etc. mileage badges?) I was immediately struck by his resemblance to one of Disney's Snow White elves and a garden gnome.

We became friends and enjoyed many chats regarding all things Volvo and the Chapter. Whenever we met, the first thing he'd say, "Let me tell you something, Bob", (at that moment he'd pause, reach into his shirt pocket, pull out an unfiltered cigarette, light it, take a deep drag) and continue while waving a cup of black coffee in the other hand.

When I didn't receive a periodic "unclub" email from Kaj, I'd either call or drive to his house, we lived about a mile apart, a knock brought him to the door. We'd have coffee and continue the previous discussion. Why? Because nothing was ever final with Kaj, there was always more to be learned.

Whenever there was a Chapter activity, Kaj would phone and ask, "May I bring some stuff to sell? And is there any charge?" My response was a simple, "yes and no." Kaj would drive up in his "new" Volvo 745 wagon, unload a dozen bins of hard to find Volvo parts. He'd be surrounded by guys and gals, holding court answering technical questions about a RWD Volvo. They'd sort through the bins like miners panning for gold; finding a part, they'd hold it up like a fisherman with a trophy bass. If you needed it, he had it or knew where to get it. (I wonder what happened to that stuff?)

About 5 years ago, the club had an event at Virginia International Raceway. I'd rented the skid pad, set out a serpentine course, and had the pad water flooded. Permission to drive like hell was granted. Taking their turn, the guys and gals ran the course for time. That was the only instance I saw Kaj drive that 745 hard into a corner, punch the gas, rear wheels locked & smoking; then power slide through the turn grinning ear to ear. "Can I do it again?" he said; I replied, "Sure." And he did, and did, and did.

With their appetite whetted, the group was led out onto the track behind a hot Volvo C30 pace car driven by Dawn Best a/k/a lead foot with traffic attorney on speed dial; they completed 10 laps before waived off. The smiles on their faces, especially Kaj's were priceless. For a moment many were reliving their glory years behind the wheel. For others, the it was best day of their life.

During one of those meet-ups at Kaj's home, he told me as a youth he'd attended an

automotive trade school in Sweden and during winter break, he and his friends would get an old car running and drive to holiday parties. As poor students, they lacked funds for expensive antifreeze. Being resourceful, they filled the leaky radiator with kerosene.

A fire was not uncommon, but there was plenty of snow to douse the flames. He survived; this resourcefulness caught the attention of Volvo. Seeking a savvy personable youthful automotive technician in the USA to support the company's east coast dealers, he was asked and accepted the challenge. He became the Volvo tech's technician. In those days, Google and YouTube did not exist; you had to talk to people about unusual automotive issues over a dial-up phone tethered to a desk. Kaj spent his time on the road unselfishly imparting knowledge to mechanics and dealers in an unhurried manner.

Kaj was a Swede by birth, an American by choice, taking his citizenship oath in 1969. He'd loan me his precious Swedish flag for Chapter events, always with detailed instructions on its care and use. He came to America, had a family, prospered and gathered many admirers and supporters.

Many years ago whilst driving along the interstate I spotted a 745 pulled over in distress. I slowed for a look, it was Kaj, now in his 70s. I stopped, hooked a tow strap to the 745 and pull it to Volvo of Cary. The 745 got an engine transplant. Kaj's friend, master technician Roger Watkins, did the job after hours on his own time. Long time friend Jerry Ashley provided the engine and transmission. Kaj had many friends, there was nothing not to like about the man.

I visited him in the hospital, slowly entered the room; after a moment he recognized me and asked in his gravelly voice, "What are you doing here?" I replied, "Visiting." He said, "Let me tell you something Bob, I'm not doing so well."

Kaj, may your windscreen be clear, the road smooth and the tank full; the Blue Ridge Chapter and the unclub miss you.

Safe Travels,  
Bob Sepe

Postlogue: Arriving in America in the 1950s, Kaj's muse was photography, his practice was centered in Washington, DC. As a reputed professional photographer, he photographed the Kennedys, international diplomats, assorted military dignitaries and other notables. (I wonder what happened to those negatives?)