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TRAVELLING THROUGH TIME

Essays in honour of Kaj Öhrnberg

Edited by

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A Dilettante

It was not quite a dark and stormy night, but certainly a rainy, murky evening in September or October 1970 or 1971, when, on my way home from evening school, I decided that it was time to find out, or at least to start to find out, what kind of place the Helsinki University Library actually was. I had begun to study Russian language and literature and knew that the Slavonic collections of the library were world-famous, thanks to its privileged status when Finland was an autonomous Grand Duchy of the Russian Empire.

The library's domed hall, nowadays reserved for exhibitions, was then filled with boxes of filing cards, a rather uninviting sight for a newcomer. After hesitating for a while, I proceeded to the northern hall and climbed the stairs for a closer look at the venerable-looking lines of volumes on the upper wall in the dim light.

There, under some kind of spotlight, a vaguely familiar-looking person of middle height and slender build was obviously studying something, but as he caught sight of me, to my amazement, he waved eagerly, inviting me to come closer.

"Nice to see you here", he whispered, observing traditional library behaviour. "Are you looking for something in particular?"

"Yes ... arr ... err ... actually ... ahem", I started, but then decided to solve at least this mystery straight away. "Excuse me, you look familiar, but I cannot place you. Where have we met?"

"Why, in Kirjavintti, of course. So, this is the first time you're here? Come, I'll show you around, and show how things work."

Kirjavintti, Kirjavintti ... yes, of course. It was a new bookshop, the first of its kind in Finland, specializing in pocket books in different languages. The founder was a German-born idealist who seemed to hire other idealists to work there. So, this most obviously was "The Other Kai", or Kaj, Öhrnberg by surname, as I had learned. The other one was Kai Nieminen, a young poet who studied Japanese and whom I had distantly known as long as I could remember because our parents were friends.

And so this "Other Kaj" walked with me around the library and taught me to use card indexes and catalogues – this was in the pre-computer age. It was char-

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acteristic of his bearing – and still is I presume – that though I had certainly seen him every time I had visited Kirjavintti, and also exchanged a few words with him on several occasions, I did not recognize him in these new surroundings. He was helpful and polite, but, unless you knew him, reticent in such a delicate manner that you barely became aware of any kind of aloofness.

Our haphazard encounter in the University Library, inconsequential and totally unhistorical in its actual content, proved to be historical in the sense that it was the beginning of a long and beautiful friendship. I started to visit Kirjavintti several times a week, not only to browse new books, but to talk with Kaj, who was no longer "the Other".

Kirjavintti had a narrow entrance-room on street level and a spacious hall on the first floor with a nice atmosphere and daylight from three directions. It had large sections of fiction, political and cultural history, mainly in English, but also some shelves for books in Swedish and German. Finnish paperbacks were rarities at the time, and the most important of them were socio-political pamphlets, which were also represented.

The atmosphere in Kirjavintti was club-like – too club-like, one could say, because it was struggling to make ends meet from the very beginning and finally went bankrupt around its tenth anniversary. Thus, even though Kaj carried out his duties diligently while working there, he always had time for some kind of conversation, if needed.

To this day, I don't know what he saw in me back then, beyond a fattish, talkative teenager who had an unhealthy interest in Faulkner, Hemingway, Dickens, and the Arthurian legends and who, worse still, had no heart for football. But then, I had come to "his" library, I studied Russian, and dreamed about a trip on the Trans-Siberian railway. Perhaps that was enough.

For me Kaj was about the first adult person – he was about twenty-seven at the time, and the word "adult" probably makes his wife Tuula chuckle – with whom I had become acquainted on my own, without any preliminary knowledge on either side, and who talked to me as an equal. We started by talking about books, and little by little got to know each other's interests and opinions. At the time it is possible that I had more interests, or they were even more diverse than his, whereas he had decidedly more opinions.

By then, I had already met several "characters", individuals who behaved eccentrically or had overpowering egos. Kaj had no outward symptoms of a "character": he was smooth, punctual, and well-behaved in an (already then) old-fashioned way, and he spoke in clear, logically constructed sentences with an even voice. Thus, for someone of my age it was revelatory to discover beneath

this low-profile matter-of-fact disguise a fascinating mixture of startling, even bizarre, viewpoints and attitudes.

First of all, he thought that public transport is something totally unnecessary and unbecoming to a thinking man, thereby unwittingly echoing Tahko Pihkala, a pioneer of Finnish popular fitness sports and exercise. If you want to get from point A to point B, you walk, and that's it. And he practised what he preached and still does, covering amazing distances on foot. He also looks like it: you could never tell his age by his appearance.

Another thing, an institution, phenomenon, or whatever you might call it, that he considered quite unnecessary, if not harmful, was literature in general – fiction, poetry, and plays, that is. It was useless to read anything fictive, because the world and the history were so marvellously interesting in themselves. My father was a poet, critic, translator, and an estimated reader for several publishing houses, my mother is a poet, short-story writer, and a translator. Even if they did not revere or mystify their professions in any way, I had grown up in an environment where literature was taken for granted, so to say. Therefore Kaj's opinions were something of a refreshing novelty for me.

Little by little during our exchanges of opinion, I discovered that Kaj's attitude towards literature was not waterproof after all. Important exceptions, and automatically absolved from his personal Index were all novels, short story collections, or volumes of poetry that had a picture of a camel on their dust-cover, or had the word "camel" in their title. Then there were some early Arabic poets, several old Chinese poets, there was François Villon, there was Willy Kyrklund. And of course there were the Russians.

"Now somewhere there in the Volga region, there lies our original home, from there we have all come and that's where we all belong in some way." Therefore everything Russian was important to Kaj: Russian history, Russian food, Russian music, and even Russian literature, in some phenomenological sense.

As I was not able to grasp in those days that Russia belongs to Kaj's romantic elsewhere, forms a part of his own mythical Orient, I did not understand this kind of uncritical, unconditional worship at all. I could not care less where we originally came from, and for me Russia is a vast territory, both physically and mentally, which includes great literature and boring literature, a precious little of good painting and very much bad painting, and the same goes to their music. As individuals the Russians can be both charming and interesting, but in hordes they are an untrustworthy lot.

Kaj thought that my attitude was shockingly flippant and eclectic, totally unsuitable for someone in the privileged position to study Russian and the Russians seriously. I asked why he did not study Russian, being so enthusiastic, and on the

other hand, why he was even more critical towards contemporary Arabic culture – "contemporary" meaning in this instance anything that has come to being since the fourteenth century – and why he was reluctant to become acquainted with any Levantine in the flesh. To these remarks he, contrary to his normal behaviour, answered something vague.

Considering the fact that all his major topics lay in the somewhat distant (G.A. Wallin) or distant past (the Arab conquest of Egypt, the fourth wife of the Prophet) Kaj has a passion which is useful and helpful to his friends – and students too, I suppose – but distracting and even harmful for himself. He is a news addict, who not only follows several foreign newspapers and magazines but, according to his own confession, cannot help reading practically everything and anything that is thrown in his mailbox, including all kinds of free newspapers and even printed flyers.

During the days when we became acquainted, when the Six-Day War was in quite fresh memory and Israel's generally aggressive policy towards its neighbours and often appalling treatment of the Palestinians had not yet become widely known, public opinion was very pro-Israel, in Finland at least, if not in the whole Western world, and this tendency was frequently evident in the news. Although by no means an anti-Semite – or, to be even more precise in this forum, an anti-Jewish person – Kaj, with his knowledge and convictions concerning the historical roots of the problems in the Middle East, considered the prevailing pro-Israel attitudes seriously one-sided and intellectually false, and at least in those days he took dilemmas of this kind so much to his heart that he found it difficult to walk in the street whenever the situation in the Arab World was publicly discussed.

I felt sorry for him because of this inconvenience, whereas his determined, almost militant atheism was a source of constant exhilaration for me. The very first time when this subject came up, I quoted to him Alex Matson's maxim: "A believer knows that he believes, an atheist believes that he knows", and have since then tried to show him that with his determined attitudes and heartfelt opinions he is much more of a believer than I, a tolerant agnostic, tending to consider questions of this kind as unanswerable, and further considering the realm of unanswerable questions, "the cloud of unknowing" a value in itself. With all his respect to Chinese wisdom, this, almost taoistic attitude Kaj finds hard to accept.

In the autumn of 1973 I enrolled at the University of Helsinki and began to study Russian language and Slavic philology. My academic career lasted six or seven months, due mainly to two circumstances. First, as I had some knowledge of the Soviet reality, I was definitely a non-leftist in my convictions, and was therefore very soon to discover who did not belong to the group. Secondly, I got

the opportunity to start to work with Otava publishers as a part-time assistant editor of Finnish fiction. Soon I was a full-time assistant and a part-time student, a status that I still occupy as a happy-go-lucky dilettante. In my Russian studies, I continued with the practical method, that is, by reading books and attending summer courses in Moscow and Leningrad.

Because of his reverence for Russian culture and language, Kaj was naturally sorry to discover that I threw away a precious opportunity and began to waste my time with something as totally useless as Finnish literature, but he took the blow stoically and did not let it harm our personal relations. He himself was busily finishing his licentiate thesis. It was examined and accepted with flying colours, and one of his professors, either Jarl Gallen or Jussi Aro, I think, told Kaj that with some finishing touches and cuts the study would be acceptable as a doctoral dissertation. But then Kaj started his lengthy and eventually problematic love affair with the Prophet's fourth wife, or something like that, and steered the camel of his erudition towards the *Rub' al-Khali* of vague hearsay, where it still seems to be roaming.

After my military service in 1976 I moved to live on my own, in Lauttasaari, where also Kaj resided in the seventies, and we started to meet more or less regularly, taking walks by the seaside or in Hietaniemi cemetery, discussing the most varied topics. As I was just starting "life", life as an independent adult, that is, Kaj gave me some instruction in handling practical matters, otherwise we rarely touched upon everyday life.

Once we went to movies together. Ingmar Bergman's Nazi-anticipatory nightmare *The Serpent's Egg* was a fresh event and I went to see it. Nobody ranks it very high in the Bergman canon, not even Bergman himself, but in its own sinister way it is quite effective. Coming out of the cinema somewhat stunned I found myself wondering was it really so that the happiest moment of the film was at the beginning, when, during the deepest depression in Berlin of the twenties, an unemployed and injured circus artist comes home drunk, only to discover that his brother had blown his brains out on the wall.

I decided to see it again and asked whether Kaj, as a historian, would be interested. German history is definitely not his cup of tea and he has never been a movie buff, but he said yes, perhaps thinking that I was lonely. We went, and it was as I had gathered: the opening scene is the most carefree moment, after that it's downhill all the way. As we came out Kaj said: "I'm really grateful that you invited me, Martti. You see, last time I was in the movies with Tuula, we saw *Andrey Rublev* and Tuula became very angry with me, because there were some scenes where they maltreated horses. Now, at last I can tell her that *Andrey R.*

isn't really so rough,[1] if only she knew." He shivered slightly. "If I would ask Tuula to see this, I would spend the next night on the street."

But usually we just walked and talked. Come to think of it, it is funny how much we have found to talk about, and talk about to our enjoyment during these four decades, considering the fact that neither of us is really into what the other is doing. I am interested in history and different aspects of culture, including Islamic culture in a general way, but about specific questions concerning the Arab conquest of Egypt, or the Prophet's fourth wife's dubious existence or al-Tantawi's influence on Wallin, I can rarely utter much more than "Oh, really" or "indeed" or, for dramatic contrast, "you don't say".

Finnish literature, my main occupation for over thirty years, does not interest Kaj in the least. Even the Russian writers seem to matter for him more as representatives of Russian culture, and more through their lives than what they actually wrote, so that differences between characterization or landscape descriptions in Turgenev's, Tolstoy's, and Chekhov's prose, or the *skaz* technique in Leskov's storytelling are not really topics where we would be at home on any equal footing.

Nevertheless, Kaj always welcomes enthusiastically my translations from Russian and my essays on Russian themes, and offers his help in every conceivable way. During the eighties I translated a three-volume selection of Chekhov's letters and provided them with a rather extensive commentary, and Kaj was only too happy to help me hunt down all kinds of source books and articles from obscure periodicals, using his virtuoso skills in finding his way in the resources of the University Library. As I am, unlike him, a lazy reader of newspapers and journals, he has taken the habit of clipping or copying for me all kinds of articles and essays which he presumes would interest me, or would be edifying reading anyway.

With the exception of François Villon and Fernand Braudel, the French, Kaj thinks, are verbose wind-bags whose cuisine is overrated, wines uninteresting and overpriced, and who by large have very little of consequence to say about anything. Therefore he was somewhat alarmed to discover that I had started learning French, and when, in the beginning of the nineties, I told him that I was about to translate Blaise Pascal's *Pensées*, these news filled him with pity and terror. I spent six years on that project, translating and immersing myself into the voluminous background literature; a task made no easier by the cavalier habit of French scholars to quote their sources randomly or to give erratic bibliographical references even to their own books. Again Kaj provided me with all the help he could, sighing only mildly. When at last I was able to hand him a fresh copy of my translation, he congratulated me warmly and added: "And now, having

1 This happened before the uncensored version of *Andrey Rublev* was released.

finished this you can forget all this gibberish and concentrate at last on Really Important Matters, such as translating Bestuzhev-Marlinsky's Caucasian stories, for instance."

As I am an editor by profession, or one of my professions, I have had the opportunity to be of assistance when Kaj has been writing something for publication. He himself is by nature much more hawk-eyed regarding mistakes in typing, checking details, uniformity in the use of quotation marks and footnotes, and so on. I, for my part, tend to make suggestions concerning the fluency and clarity of language, the overall logic of the discourse, and try to take care that – to use Sir Alan Gardiner's neat concepts – "the Thing Said" and "the Thing Meant" will correspond.

In the early eighties we both moved from Lauttasaari, I to the old centre of Helsinki, Kaj to Katajanokka. Little by little, our walks became rarer and we took up the habit of having lunch together. We keep it up, usually about twice a month. Over the decades no drastic changes have occurred in our personal lives – writing this I naturally touch wood – but as both academe and the conditions in the book-publishing business have changed in so many ways, as well as the mental atmosphere in general, our lunch meetings with their stubbornly out-of-date and far-from-the-madding-crowd topics somehow remind me of Satyajit Ray's film *The Chess Players*, where two chess addicts obsessively take new rounds whenever and wherever they meet, paying no attention to the different plots brewing around them and eventually the whole of old India collapsing somewhere in the background.

The Russian language has a beautiful and expressive way to define low-profile behaviour: *nizhe travy, tishe vody* – lower than the grass, more calm (or silent) than the water. In a general sense, this would be a good description of Kaj's attitude and his tendency to keep his privacy, but he is also a man of values and principles, and even has a rebellious strain in his nature. Once in his not-so-wild youth he was thrown out of a soccer game – from the stands, I mean – because he protested so furiously against a referee's decision. The incident was mentioned in the newspaper *Hufvudstadsbladet*.

During his Kirjavintti days, Kaj took keen interest in the cause of the Kurds, and subsequently in the fates of the rebellious minorities and tribes of the Caucasus. The one work by Lev Tolstoy that he has read with vivid interest is *Hadzhi-Murat*, which describes the life and position of Caucasian separatists. His favourite character in Russian letters is Lermontov, and in his library – his home library, this time – there is a whole section reserved for the history and writings of Soviet dissidents.

Once at some party, as we were filling our glasses one of the editors of this book, among many other things a connoisseur of white wines, was wondering why on earth does his estimated teacher and friend Kaj (who was not present) prefer the red stuff. As I myself usually find red wines more interesting, I had no difficulty in understanding this, but I suggested furthermore that Kaj most likely gets extra kicks from red wine, because that was the beverage which the Prophet explicitly forbade. After all, he is a believer, as I already mentioned.

But this rebelliousness is but one strain, one side of Kaj's character, and usually under very good control, as we all know. There is a keyword much more vital in order to understand his personality, his interests and ideals, what keeps him ticking, a word one encounters frequently in his articles and lectures. The word is "escapism".

Not for nothing has this man, who eats only beef, chicken, and vegetables and would not put liver, kidneys or (someone else's) tongue in his mouth, let alone tripe or brains, become a notorious expert on cookbooks and the history of nutrition in exotic cultures. Not for nothing did he choose G.A. Wallin as the subject of his lifelong interest, a contemporary of Castrén and Lönnrot, who, when all others flocked to Karelia and Siberia looking for our roots, went alone into the Arabian desert and wanted to stay there. The decisive and, considering the situation in the Middle East, happy difference between the object and the scholar is that Kaj is content in performing his escapades between his own ears. A man who never leaves Helsinki, except when he goes to pick blueberries with Tuula near Tammisaari, and whose itineraries in his hometown are well-trodden, is a voracious reader of travel literature, preferably historical travel literature, but even more recent works will do, if the traveller goes to odd enough places; one of Kaj's latter-day heroes seeming to be Bruce Chatwin. And by his own confession he can also watch the most stupid action movies, if the action takes place in some magnificent landscape.

"The past is a foreign country", begins the first sentence of L.P. Hartley's novel *The Go-Between*. Whatever implications the words carry in Hartley's novel or in David Lowenthal's rewarding study of the interaction between the past and the present with this title, they somehow seem to put in a nutshell the very essence of Kaj's yearning: the most fascinating destinations are those which are clearly out of our physical reach, in terms of either time or space, or preferably both. Alongside Russian culture, foreign to Kaj because of the language barrier, and the historical "Happy Arabia", foreign because of the time gap, there was for him yet another spiritual Shangri-La, even more vast and providing even richer possibilities to cherish and contemplate, to indulge oneself into enchantment, so to say, and that was the culture of old China. He had an amazing collection of

books on different aspects of the subject, and innumerable essays, articles, and other papers copied from various sources, all of which he let go some years ago, partly because they took so much space in his shelves, partly, I suppose, because he felt he had to get rid of something in order to concentrate to certain projects that he still wants to accomplish.

I feel sorry for the China collection, but then I am glad to know that the most important, or at least, the most voluminous of Kaj's projects, a critical edition of G.A. Wallin's collected papers is already well under way to completion. And I see, if not historical inevitability, at least some kind of historical justice in that Kaj Öhrnberg, an enchanted wanderer in spirit, is taking care of the publication of the heritage of a founding father of Finnish Orientalism and the most notorious escapist among Finnish explorers.