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Memorial of Oleg von Knorring 1915-1994

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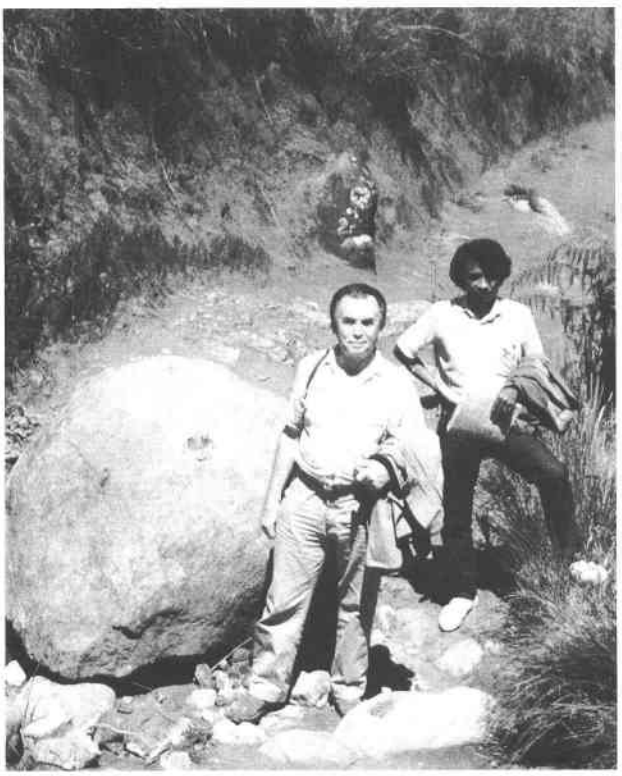
Oleg von Knorring was born in 1915 and lived as a child near Novgorod,[1] south of Saint Petersburg, where the family was well known. His grandfather was a general living in Saint Petersburg and his great grandfather a judge in Karelia (Karel'skaya). The family moved from Russia to Finland after the Bolshevik revolution, when Finland gained its independence.

Oleg was educated at the Swedish High School in Helsinki and, from 1934 to 1939, at the University of Helsinki, where he studied geology under the renowned Pentii Eskola. In 1938 he became a private research assistant to a professor of mineralogy, L. H. Borgström. During this period he took part in a geological expedition to Newfoundland and Labrador, where he studied lamprophyres under E. H. Kranck.

From 1940 to 1944 von Knorring served with the Finnish army. While stationed on the Karelian front, he learned that he had been granted three months' leave, through the good offices of Pentii Eskola, in order to complete his M.Sc. examinations. In later years he would recall walking the 30 km back to Helsinki from the front in subzero temperatures with his pack on his back and his violin under his arm. He had met his future wife, Saga, in 1936, while working in an industrial laboratory to earn money for his studies (he also earned money playing the violin); they were married in 1941 in Helsinki.

After completing his army service he returned to the university as a research geochemist in the Department of Geology. It was while he was working on the mineralogy and geochemistry of Fe ores in southwest Finland, his eventual Ph.D. topic, that he was granted an ICI research fellowship to study at Leeds University. He joined the Department of Geology there in October 1948 and in 1950 was appointed lecturer in mineralogy and geochemistry. He worked with W. Q. Kennedy, who was attracted by Oleg's unrivaled encyclopedic knowledge of the Earth's 2000 or so (then known) minerals, with which, it seemed, he had almost a personal relationship. In 1951–1952 Kennedy led two geological expeditions to Mount Ruwenzori, which straddles the Western Rift between Uganda and Zaire. Oleg was a member of the expeditions, and thus began his lifelong love of Africa.

In 1955 he left Leeds University to join the Geological Survey of Malaya, where he became interested in the varied mineralogy of the Sn placer deposits. However, after a year he was recalled by Kennedy and appointed as an Oppenheimer Geological Fellow within the Research Institute of African Geology. His international recognition was rewarded when he was made a Reader in Mineral Chemistry in 1962.



Oleg von Knorring (left) with a coworker in the field in Madagascar.

In order to verify new minerals, lengthy purification and wet chemical analytical procedures were necessary in those days before electron microprobes (when microprobes were being installed there was a great demand for OVK material). He would work until 9 p.m., and often on weekends, on the top floor of the Victorian building of the Geology Department in Hilary Place. In this laboratory and later in the new Earth Science building, he would meticulously and unhurriedly carry out the time-consuming hand-picking of a powdered concentrate with a needle under a binocular microscope.

[1] Because of recent relaxation of travel restrictions in Russia, Oleg and his family were able to visit Saint Petersburg and Novgorod in 1992. He was overwhelmed by the joyous reception given by his relatives, most of whom he had never seen, except one elderly cousin, last seen by him as a baby girl in a cradle.

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He would thus acquire data to confirm many new minerals, varieties and new occurrences of rare species that he had tentatively identified visually in the field, mainly in pegmatites in Uganda, Tanzania, Rwanda, Namibia, Zaire, Nigeria, Ghana, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Lesotho and Madagascar, as well as in Finland. Oleg's prodigious memory enabled him to remember the name and locality of every specimen in his extensive collection. His list of publications also includes descriptions of specimens from Malaysia, Canada (Labrador), Spain, Egypt, Ireland, and the U.K. (Devon, Cornwall, Sutherland, Outer Hebrides). He and his coauthors published new mineral descriptions for bertossaite, burangite, cerotungstite, holdawayite, karibibite, kennedyite, mboziite, mpororoite, namibite, rankamaite, waylandite, and westgrenite. His coworkers were mainly students and colleagues. Through one of them, Th. G. Sahama of Helsinki University, he maintained contacts with Finland. In 1988 Oleg was awarded the insignia of the Order of the White Rose of Finland, Knight First Class, in recognition of his scientific achievements and the presentation of a large collection of mineral specimens to his old university.

He always had time to advise students, to discuss problems, and to translate papers (he spoke six languages: English, Finnish, German, Norwegian, Russian, and Swedish) and to reminisce about the old days with those who had visited Africa with him. For someone who was quiet and retiring, he wrote many letters and kept in contact with many colleagues, prospectors, and former students of all nationalities. Such was his love of Africa and his insatiable thirst for minerals that, after retirement, he held the post of Chief Geologist (Mineralogist) with the Namibian Geological Survey from 1981–1984. A few months before his death on April 6, 1994, at the age of 78, he was actively involved with a Canadian diamond research project in the Department of Earth Sciences at Leeds. He was in his element demonstrating the technique of heavy mineral separation and visual identification to an audience of admiring colleagues. His eye was as keen as ever as he singled out diamond and unusual mineral species that were deserving of further study, and these were put carefully aside—the habit of a lifetime.

It is appropriate that in 1968 knorringite, a chrome magnesia garnet from a Lesotho kimberlite, was named after him by two former students.

Oleg will be missed by many former students. Future students will look enquiringly at the many mineral specimens—his memorial to them—that he left behind at Leeds and elsewhere. His many friends from all walks of life, especially in Africa, Scandinavia, and in his adopted home in the U.K., will remember him with deep affection. Our sympathies go to Saga, and to George, Marina, Peter, and Catherine.

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[2] A complete list of publications of Oleg von Knorring is available as Document AM-95-576 from the Business Office, Mineralogical Society of America, 1130 Seventeenth Street NW, Suite 330, Washington, DC 20036, U.S.A. Please remit $5.00 in advance for the microfiche.