

I read an article in *The Guardian* recently that made me think back to all that I had heard about the episode. This is something most Americans probably never even knew, or if they did, they forgot about it immediately.

But, when Runo and I were living in Sweden during the first year of our marriage, this bit of Swedish history was pretty new. And, the first time it came to my attention, it was because of something that happened when Runo's mother and I were walking down the road to visit a neighbor. Most of us are well aware that when we walk down a road also traveled by automobiles, we walk on the left side of the road so that we are meeting traffic that is coming from the opposite direction.

The same rule applies in Sweden. So, when a car was approaching from the other way, I automatically moved to the left edge of the dirt road. Gunborg grabbed my arm and tried to pull me to the other side of the roadway before abruptly letting go of me and following me to the left.

I knew what had happened. It had been less than four years since that day in September, 1967, when Swedish traffic rules had changed. Before that time, one drove on the left side of the road in that Scandinavian country, though in the two nations on the land borders with Sweden—Norway and Finland—vehicles drove on the right.

The changeover came about for several reasons, but the way it was handled was typically well-ordered and safe, just as one would expect from this orderly land. During the weeks leading up to the switch, new road signs were erected and sheathed in black plastic. Cities were more complicated with one-way streets to consider or placement of bus stops. In the rural areas, it was more straightforward. During the night of September 2-3, most driving stopped. If a car was on the road, it had to stop at 4:50 a.m. and slowly proceed to the other lane. There, it had to stop again and wait for any car doing the same maneuver from the opposite direction. When traffic resumed, it was with drastically reduced speed limits for a time.

During that night, road workers had removed the black coverings from traffic signals and used them to cover the signs on the other side of the road.

The transition went very smoothly over the next few weeks with very few traffic accidents.

The area of Sweden where we lived, though, is smack on the Norwegian border, and we have relatives on both sides. I knew that people were accustomed to going back and forth regularly, for visits, shopping, or work. I wondered how much trouble it was —before the 1967 switch—to go back and forth across the border, changing lanes and traffic rules on the fly.

I asked Runo. “Not a problem,” he said. “Guess we were just always used to it.” I did realize, though, that a lifetime of walking on the right side of a road caused Gunborg to instinctively try to pull me in that direction when we met a car on the country road in 1971.