

SPEAKING NORWEGIAN
by Helen Olson

Although Daddy and all of his seven siblings spoke only Norwegian before they started school, none of our generation can say much more than "God Yul."

Cousin Bernie, however, speaks English like her mother, Aunt Lena, and when she gets excited that familiar Norwegian lilt creeps into her cadence and she begins to punctuate her speech with those wonderful Norwegian "yeahs," spoken on an intake of breath and impossible to translate onto the page.

One day, I was teasing her about being the only person I knew who had a Norwegian accent and didn't speak Norwegian.

"(Intake of breath) Oh, yes I do," she said. "I can swear in Norwegian. You know how Grandpa Alec couldn't talk without swearing? Well, when he really wanted to curse, he did it in Norwegian. And I remember the words, so I can swear in Norwegian.

"A couple of years ago, Tom and I were in Oslo, just sight-seeing, you know. We were walking down the sidewalk and I was talking away to Tom when a couple of Norwegian men passed us and one of them said to the other, in Norwegian, 'There goes an American bitch.'

"So I said to Tom, '(Intake of breath) Excuse me.' And I turned around and walked back to those guys and said all the Norwegian swear words I know.

"'You're a Norske,' one of them said. '(Intake of breath) Yeah,' I said and turned on my heel and walked back to Tom.

" 'What did you say to them,' he asked. 'All the Norwegian swear words I know,' I said. 'But what do they mean?' he asked. 'I don't know,' I said."

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