

## Growing up in Harstad

Harstad is close enough to the North Pole that, were it located an equal distance from the South Pole, it would be on the polar ice cap. About one month of the year in the winter, there is no daylight, and for one month in the summer, there is midnight sun. Because of the Gulf Stream, the lowest temperature ever measured in my hometown is 0° F.

A few members of Torske Klubben come from that area: Nik Kirkeng, Odd Undstad and Ulf Bach. And many more families in Minnesota came from Northern Norway: Lois Quam, Eric Utne, former Governor Rolvaag, Arlene Dahl, and Chris Skjervold.

Growing up in Norway for me means World War II — I was born in 1938. My father fought in the Battle of Narvik in 1940 — the first battle Germany lost. Harstad was a garrison town — every day, columns of Russian prisoners marched by our house, and my mother prepared food packages for me to bring to them, trying to avoid the armed German guards. In return, the Russians slipped me beautifully carved wooden objects: Birds, animals, toys. One day, a guard pushed by me and used his bayonet on a Russian who had just received my package. Blood poured out of him. The next day, I refused to go out with food. My mother ordered me to do it. Thinking back on it, I know the Germans would not have harmed a 5-year-old boy. So, it was the least that I could do to help.

My mother had only a 7<sup>th</sup> grade education, but she was on the School Board, and it was said about her that she had read all the books in the town library. She also had “the look.” It was a look so fierce that if she nailed me with one of those, I would confess to things I had not even done! Boss Thorshov had that look, and it is a requirement for every Torske Klubben boss from Fremmegaard to Gisvold. The main effect is to make you feel insignificant, which is very good for you.

My mother had a saying for everything. About slowness: “He does not ride the day he saddles his horse, that man.” About opportunism: “‘Better dead than not knowing what to do’ said the man as he wiped off the table with his cat.” About deformities: “Eleven fingers are better than none.”

My father was a daredevil. He once dived from a crane into the ocean 60 feet below. When the Salangen Iron Works freighted its ore in giant baskets from a mountain top to the docks of Salangsverket, my father held on to the bottom of one such basket and was whisked down the mountainside at 30 miles per hour over a 200-foot drop.

Snow removal in Harstad consisted of a team of 4 horses pulling a wooden plow, shaped like a triangle, through the streets. My friends and I loved to grab onto the plow and glide on the soles of our boots through the wintry landscape. It was a practice discouraged by the driver, and probably his horses, but it was child’s play for us. We were outdoors kids — skiing, jumping, downhill, bicycling,

fighting kids from the other parts of town, climbing mountains, fishing, and trying to impress cute girls. This latter was not easy.

It took me months to get my courage up to say to Kirsten E., a drop-dead gorgeous girl in our schoolyard, this well-rehearsed compliment:

I: “That’s a pretty dress you’re wearing.”

Norwegians cannot accept compliments.

Kirsten said: “Oh, this is an old dress.”

I had anticipated that response from my behavioral observations over the years, so I said, “It looks really good with that scarf.”

Kirsten: “Look here, Tor, there is a stain on the scarf, and even the dress has a little tear in it.”

I went mute. Clearly, I had made a total fool of myself. I had complimented her on something that was clearly some awful hand-me-downs from her elder sister, and I resolved never ever to compliment a Norwegian girl again — for any reason. Most Norwegian boys reach this same conclusion.

That’s why Norwegian girls go to Italy for summer vacations. So they can get the compliments they need.

As for boys, I’ve seen boys walk into a tree after receiving a compliment. It’s probably a matter for the Department of Homeland Security if you are prone to give a lot of compliments in Norway.

If a hostess offers you a second serving, you must always say, “No, thank-you,” even if every fiber in your body screams, “Yes! Yes! Please, give me another piece of cake or I will die!”

Because the hostess will invariably urge you to have another piece (unless she thinks that you are allergic to food, weigh 300 pounds, or are about to throw up)

Then it’s alright to say, “Yes.” But not before.

When I stood for confirmation at 15, I ended up being #1 on the church floor, because I had memorized Luther’s Catechism from beginning to end, and knew all the Psalms in Landstad’s Psalm Book.

Being #1 means that the Bishop will grill you on behalf of all the 250 confirmands who had better things to do with their time (possibly learning how to compliment Norwegian girls in a better way).

After a few low-ball questions about the Nicene Creed, Luther's explanation of the 7<sup>th</sup> Commandment, and the Trinity, the Bishop asked, "What is the greatest celebration of the Church?"

"Christmas," I said, figuring that a word that had "Christ" in it had to be it.

"No," said the Bishop.

I knew then that it had to be Easter or Whitsun, but I was not going to gamble again. "What is it?" I asked.

"Easter," said Bishop Norderval.

"Without Christmas, there would not be an Easter," I stated. (*Smart mouth!*) (*Tor's addition: The note in parenthesis was written by Loretta Hazlett, whom I had entrusted with the typing and editing of this little speech, but NOT actually adding to it.*)

Bishop Norderval was only momentarily befuddled. Twenty years later, I read the biography of Nils Bohr, the Danish physicist. He said, "To every great truth in the universe, the opposite is also true."

The Bishop might have said, "Without Easter, there would not have been a Christmas." The mystery of faith. We cannot do without it.

In my hometown, we go to the cemetery on Christmas Eve. We place candles on the graves of loved ones who had passed away: My little brother who died of whooping cough; my dad's sister who died of consumption. The whole cemetery is flickering with lights. Above, the Northern Lights flare across the sky, and at 5 o'clock, the church bells start ringing in Christmas.

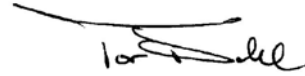
We walk home. The freshly fallen snow crackles under our feet. We go home to a feast of pork ribs, knockwurst, mashed kohlrabi, rice pudding, fattigmann, kransekake, pepperkaker, and the walk around the Christmas tree holding hands and singing the old songs that always bring tears to my eyes — and that even Alzheimer's patients don't forget. My grandmother reads from the Family Bible, now in my treasured possession, the Gothic script from Luke: "Og det skjedde i de dage at det utgikk et bud fra Keiser Augustus at all verden skulle innskrives i manntall."

Outside, it is dark 24 hours of the day in the Decembers of my youth. Yet it is the light that I remember: The Aurora Borealis, the glittering snow crystals, the candles on my brother's grave, the fire in the fireplace, the Christmas tree ablaze with — yes — live, lit candles.

I know that when my own shadows grow longer, and that good night is inching closer, I shall think about the Lights of Harstad, the glow of the fireplace, the

warmth of family — and that shining thought may just hold the darkness at bay a little while longer.

North Oaks, December 9, 2006

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Loraine" or similar, with a long horizontal stroke above it.