

Following Dr. Lotta's Footsteps in India

By Joyce Thierry Llewellyn

North Vancouver BC resident Joyce Thierry Llewellyn and her family made a pilgrimage to India in 2001, to follow the footsteps of USC founder Dr. Lotta Hitschmanova to a remote health post that was indeed very dear to Dr. Lotta's heart. Here is their story.

India affected my family in a more profound way than anywhere else we visited on our year-long, backpacking trip around the world. Nothing can prepare a North American for India. We had to learn how to deal with our guilt at being able to buy food when we were hungry while all around us people in need haunted us, an experience Dr. Lotta echoed when she wrote: "Very often I am haunted by what I have seen during the day and so at night, it is difficult to sleep."

Dr. Lotta's relationship with India was one of the most profound in her life. She made life-long friends. She also saw needs that could be solved with simple measures, like providing easy access to medical care. This is what first took her to the Karnatak Health Institute (KHI), in the late 1940s. Dr. Lotta played an instrumental role in keeping KHI going in the 1950s, and helped modernize its services. In one of her journal entries she called it her "second home" and so I was most curious to see what it was like, almost 30 years after the USC had ended their support.

When I had initially phoned KHI, I was quickly put through to Dr. Kiran Vaidya, an orthopedic surgeon and the son of the man who had been struggling to run the hospital when Dr. Lotta first arrived those many years ago. Dr. Lotta's name worked magic. The friendship between Dr. Vaidya's parents and Dr. Lotta had influenced his feelings for Canadians; we've all been painted with a loving brush as a result of her Karnatak work.

We had to get to Belgaum, the closest town to the KHI. We travelled by bus for hours on a badly rutted dirt mountain road just slightly wider than a single lane. Once we arrived in Belgaum, we hired a taxi for the 70 kilometer ride further into the rural countryside, past sugar cane and sunflower fields. When we finally arrived at Ghataprabha, it was quickly obvious this was not a village mentioned in any tourist guidebooks.

I felt my familiar sense of admiration for Dr. Lotta, considering the hardships she endured during her yearly visits to India in the 50s, 60s and 70s. She was a veteran traveler, experienced at changing tires, crossing flooded roads, sweeping away bugs in basic accommodations, living on minimal food, hiking up stone-strewn paths to reach isolated villages, and regularly had to drive down dirt roads, up mountain sides, and into remote valleys.

Ghataprabha felt like a town at the end of the world. But once the taxi drove through the gates of the Karnatak Health Institute we entered a different world, a 149-acre oasis of greenery and order. There was a general feeling of goodwill everywhere I looked. We unpacked at the guesthouse, the same guesthouse, and room apparently, where Dr. Lotta usually stayed, as did Nehru, the first Prime Minister of Independent India, during his visit in the 1950s.

The next few days were filled with hectic, whirlwind on-site tours, visits to outlying villages and meetings with people who had met or worked with Dr. Lotta many years ago. KHI's philosophy of taking care of anyone "without any distinction of or consideration of caste, creed, religion, age, sex, social status, morals, character, financial condition or political affiliation" makes it obvious why Dr. Lotta called this her "second home". Their ideologies were the same.

One afternoon, Dr. Kiran gave me the hospital copy of *A Golden Leaf* to read. It had been made for Dr. Lotta by KHI staff and friends and presented at her 1975 farewell party. The large and

heavy leather-bound book is a handwritten collection of stories, poems, and sketches put together as a sign of affection and appreciation for her years of friendship and help.

I was able to get a fuller picture of Dr. Lotta. She always travelled light to make more room for files, cameras, and her ever-present notebook and typewriter. She never left anything to memory, relying on her three to four cameras to make visual records of what she found, and was apparently always flipping open her notebook to record quotes, statistics, observations, and requests from the people she met. I read repeated references to Dr. Lotta's "sparrow-like appetite". How she felt every penny she spent was public money and therefore must be accountable. She washed her own clothes and typed her own letters, insisting that "Every minute was so valuable!"

Dr. Kiran also brought me hospital files from the 1960s and 70s, filled with letters from Dr. Lotta, bureaucratic forms, and quickly scribbled lists of things needed for the hospital, all of them examples of the hardships Dr. Lotta experienced. In one 1961 letter to Dr. Kiran's father, she wrote about her frustration at her body falling so ill that she ended up in hospital for two weeks and had to cut her trip short, bypassing planned visits to Hong Kong and Korea and going straight home to Canada. In 1965 in Mudurai, her feet kept swelling, and she felt constantly irritable, finding it hard to be patient and kind to the people around her.

Dr. Lotta returned to KHI annually for almost 25 years, welcomed back with calls from both staff and locals of "Lotabai! Lotabai!" – a Maharashtra dialect variation on her name. I continued to meet people who still remember her with affection and appreciation.

One hot, humid afternoon, I heard a knock at our front door. An elderly man introduced himself, a doctor from a neighbouring village who had accompanied Dr. Vaidya and Dr. Lotta on their rounds whenever she visited in the 60s and 70s. He provided me with my first experience of anyone talking about Dr. Lotta with male appreciation. "She was a good-looking woman," he said, nodding repeatedly.

One day, we travelled to one of the 25 rural health centres serviced by KHI, a rough, white-washed building also serving as a meeting place. It also supported a women's group, originally started by Dr. Lotta in the early 1950s and still going strong today, where women continue to walk for several hours to attend the monthly meetings. Dr. Lotta used to come by bullock to visit and would stay for three or four hours, visiting with the women and children.

Another day, we made a slight detour to a beautiful waterfall. I was told that when Dr. Vaidya wanted to show Dr. Lotta this very spectacular sight, she said, "I have no time for sightseeing. I am not expected to spend time that way, when I have so much to do."

When the USC Indian projects ended in 1975, Dr. Lotta gave KHI a final grant of 100,000 Rupees (about \$10,000 CN at the time). It was put into an Endowment Trust Fund for rural development in the name of Dr. Lotta and the USC. Dr. Lotta's hope was that the money would help keep the programs going that she had been instrumental in starting. Dr. Kiran told me that KHI has kept the 100,000 rupees fund intact and only uses the interest toward specific projects.

It has been a long while since I have been as touched by the spirit of a place as I was by Karnatak. There was laughter and satisfaction even amid so much distress and pain. The USC was instrumental in helping this Institute survive and grow at a time when it needed not only financial and material help but also Dr. Lotta's encouragement and enthusiasm for their work. It was a very successful USC investment that continues to pay off today, and would continue to make Lotabai proud.