

Dr. Lotta’s journey from Marseille to Ottawa in 1942

By Joyce Thierry Llewellyn



Dr. Lotta with children at the Maison de Sevres, 1950

One hundred metres from the busy port of Marseille, France, is the run down—and now in 2009—condemned Hotel Pavillon. In 1941-1942, Dr. Lotta Hitschmanova lived on the fifth floor, her tiny room the cheapest in the hotel and reached by climbing a claustrophobic winding staircase. I stayed in the hotel seven years ago. It was clean but rundown even then, the walls scraped, the floors ripped in places. Standing in the doorway of her attic-like room, seeing the single bed and the nails jutting out of one wall panel for the occupant’s clothes, I had tried to imagine what her life might have been like. She had fled Prague, Czechoslovakia in 1938, forced to leave her family after her fiery anti-Nazi newspaper articles had put her life in danger. She became one of thousands of refugees trying to stay one step ahead of the German army, moving from city to city. She found short-term translating work or cataloguing art collections and slept in barns when there was no other shelter available.

Marseille was at the end of the road after three grueling years. After reading Clyde Sanger’s wonderfully researched book, *Lotta and the Unitarian Service Committee Story*, I have come to think of Marseille as the place where the USC seed was planted in Dr. Lotta’s heart. She arrived desperate to get a visa to the US or Canada. It was not hard to imagine she had spent many lonely evenings in that tiny room drinking watery coffee, smoking cigarettes and listening to

classical music on her small tinny radio. She found work as a secretary-interpreter for the director of the International Migration Service. Dr. Lotta’s ability to speak Czech, German, French, Spanish, and English was invaluable at a time when so many people were on the move. The IMS office was within easy walking distance of her room at the Pavillon hotel and near the Prefecture (police office) where she had to report each month to get her work permit extended. It was a frightening, soul-wearying time. Her Jewish background was just one more reason for the French Vichy government to turn her over to the Germans if she came to their attention. She constantly worried about her parents and her sister Lily. (It was only after the war was over that she learned Lily had escaped to Palestine and her parents had died somewhere between Theresienstadt and Auschwitz concentration camps.). She was always hungry, surviving on beetroot and carrots, and had sold all of her jewellery, only keeping a pearl necklace which had been a gift from her mother. (The few pieces of jewellery she wore during her 40 years with the USC were a watch, a Canadian pin, and a ring made with a single pearl; I’ve never been able to find out if that ring was made from the original pearl, or was perhaps in memory of it.)

The one bright light in her life was helping other refugees. With pen and notebook in hand, she asked questions and recorded refugees’ stories. She argued with city officials and the Prefecture (chief of police), attempting to help refugees get exit visas or to arrange the release of French and immigrant Jews from transit camps where they were being held until they were shipped north to Drancy Transit Camp outside Paris and then on to Auschwitz. Unsuccessful at getting people out of the camps, she organized food packages to alleviate some of their suffering. This was the same way she later worked for over 40 years on behalf of her beloved USC.

One summer day, she spent her lunch hour in the local market trying to find some food. On her way back to work, she fainted from hunger in the street. She received help in the nearby American Unitarian Service Committee medical clinic where a doctor gave her a tetanus shot, bandaged her bleeding hands, cleaned up the cut on her mouth, and fed her some tonic. This painful, personal low point not only introduced Dr. Lotta to the American Unitarian Service Committee, it was also one more step toward her vow that no other women and children would suffer the same fear, hunger, and desperation that she knew only too well. She was finally issued a visa to Canada and arrived in 1942 “exhausted...I came with \$60 in my pocket. I had an unpronounceable name. I weighed less than 100 lbs.” Within three years she had formed the Unitarian Service Committee of Canada with the understanding it would help people left destitute in post-WWII Europe. The USC would last four years. But there was always another war or country in need—Korea, Vietnam, newly-independent India, Hong Kong, drought-stricken Bangladesh—and in 2009, the year we are celebrating Dr. Lotta’s 100th birthday, USC projects are focused in 12 countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

Dr. Lotta’s legacy ensures that people “in the forgotten corners of the world” as she was heard to say, receive not only basic food and medicine aid but also tools and education to become self-sufficient. Dr. Lotta saved hundreds of thousands of people around the world. In 1983, when

she was accepting the Rotary Award for World Understanding, she was still passionate about the USC, telling the audience that “[we must] aim at one single goal: to help make this torn, crying, bleeding world of ours a peaceful shrine for everyone—whatever his or her language, background, or colour.” Happy Birthday Dr. Lotta.