

Dr. Lotta Hitschmanova and the USC

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From the CUC website: http://www.cuc.ca/ministry/sermon_series/sermon_sather.htm

Reading

Gordon Ralston: Many years ago two little girls in our Victoria UU church did their own fundraising for the Unitarian Service Committee and Dr. Hitchmanova was so taken with this, that she asked me to write an account of it.

Here's the story. The two little girls were Ellen Ralston, our youngest daughter, and her friend Karin Tebbutt. They were probably about 10 years old, though maybe younger. Both were very aware of the USC and its work. Karin's grandmother was, I believe, a member of the USC, and used to do a special fundraising among friends each year. She was not a Unitarian, though Karin's mother Sylvia was a church member and for a time, RE Director. Ellen, of course, had been with us and helping at Dr. Hitchmanova's annual meetings in Victoria and knew her. Both children loved to draw. One fall, when I was having a large work party at our church (I was in charge of Housekeeping and Maintenance) Karin and Ellen set up a table and made signs saying that they would make original pictures for sale at 10 cents each. They took orders all day (and there were many purchasers) and for the next weeks they carefully drew pictures to fill the orders and delivered them on the following Sundays. When Dr. Lotta arrived for her fall meeting here, Karin and Ellen came up on the stage and presented her with the money they'd collected for the children the USC helped.

Reading

Phillip Hewett: When I first arrived in Vancouver in 1956 the USC work was a big feature in the life of the church. Lotta used to make an annual visit and spoke at the church as well as making endless contacts in the wider community. The church basement in our old building was so crammed with cartons of used clothing shipped in from all over the province that teams of volunteers, nearly all members of the congregation, toiled almost every day to pack and clear the consignments before the next ones arrived. Needless to add, there was a great sense of camaraderie among the workers, and it was a great way of integrating newcomers into the life of the congregation. This continued year after year, and when we designed our new building in 1963, it included a large basement space for the USC packing with a driveway on which trucks could back up to the entrance. When eventually the packing of used clothing and other supplies was discontinued in favour of financial support, this space was redesigned and designated Hitschmanova Hall. More recently, sales from a crafts table at coffee hour have provided funds for the USC.

Dr. Lotta

March 11, 2004

Do you remember the famous address, 56 Sparks Street, in Ottawa? It used to be part of the Unitarian Service Committee's television ad. Many people remember it spoken in the accented voice of Lotta Hitschmanova. Who remembers the postal code? [K1P 5B1]

Tomorrow is International Women's Day, a time to celebrate the accomplishments of women, stemming from a time when women were the invisible workers without any recognition. Too often the stories of women are not there, unless we go digging for them. Such was the case with the celebrated Canadian Unitarian we will focus on today, Dr. Lotta Hitschmanova. There are references to her in many places, but most are fleeting. I found only one book featuring her. Even the USC Canada web site had no details of her life or her contributions to humanitarian work the world over, or of her organizational work with the USC.

I want to take the time today to share Dr. Lotta's story. It is one of determination and resourcefulness, of intelligence and a deep understanding of people. Yet we know so little about her. In six weeks, you'll hear more about the work that USC Canada does now from Denise Wrathall. She will share stories of her experiences overseas of how lives have been touched by the USC Canada.

Dr. Hitschmanova was a member of the Ottawa Unitarian church, and today there is a bronze bust of her in their foyer as a reminder of our obligation to help those in need. Dr. Lotta, as she was known, was rewarded for her work many times, including the designation Companion of the Order of Canada, and the Rotary International Award for World Understanding, and national awards from Lesotho, Korea, India, Greece, and France. Dr. Hitschmanova proudly accepted these awards for the USC and wore them on her self-designed uniform, five rows of ribbons. However, she never accepted an honorary degree, although she did once address a university audience.

You may know that Lotta Hitschmanova was from Czechoslovakia, but the trip she made from there to Canada was a long and winding one. She was born in 1909 in Prague, the daughter of a prosperous family. She had a younger sister, Lilly. Their mother was elegant and socially ambitious, and fluent in several languages, including Italian, French and English as well as German, the state language at the time. Their nanny spoke Czech; their governess taught them French. The girls attended school together, and Lotta finished with honours. Even then, she tried to help others, running an informal tutorial during the morning high school recess for those who were not prepared for the daily Greek and Latin classes.

Lotta entered the University of Prague in 1929, studying languages, and spent two of those four years in Paris at the Sorbonne. One of her several diplomas in various

languages earned her a scholarship for her Ph.D. Then she was back to Paris for more studies in journalism and political science. After she finished in 1935, she returned to Prague to help her father in his malt growing business. She couldn't stay away from political journalism, though, and managed to be a correspondent for several papers until the signing of the Munich Pact in 1938. Her views were definitely anti-Nazi, so she was persuaded to leave Czechoslovakia for her safety, returning to Paris. And then on to friends in Belgium and back again after some time there, leaving just ahead of the advancing German army. In 1941, she was in Marseilles, trying to get a visa to go to the United States. The migration service she appealed to was not able to help, but they did need a secretary and interpreter fluent in French, English, German, Spanish and Czech! She was able to forget her own pain by helping others. However, her diet of beets and carrots led to a collapse on the street from fatigue and hunger. She was taken to a clinic run by the Unitarian Service Committee, an outreach of the American Unitarian Association in Boston.

Thus began Lotta Hitschmanova's work with the Unitarian Service Committee.

She had originally wished to emigrate to the US, but the visa that come through was from Canada. She caught the last boat from Lisbon to New York, and then went on to Montreal. She settled in Ottawa, and joined the Unitarian church there.

By 1945, the idea of a Canadian Unitarian Service Committee had become a possibility. Representatives from the six Canadian Unitarian churches—from Ottawa, Montreal, Toronto, Hamilton, Winnipeg and Vancouver—met and eventually approved the notion. At first, the organization raised funds from Unitarians only, but that didn't last long. Unitarians were, however, the core support for many years.

What I first heard about regarding the Unitarian Service Committee was the collecting of clothes to send overseas. To hear some stories of Unitarian involvement, I put a query out on several email lists. My friend Helen Backhouse shares these memories.

“I know that the Lakeshore church in Pointe Claire, Quebec was very involved as I was part of the involvement. We collected, washed, mended and packed clothing for a number of years. I used to go with our VW bus to church sales and pick up all the left over used clothing. Sometimes there was just room for me to get into the van and drive it using the outside mirrors to see. Besides all the packing, there were a number of women who knitted for children, and others who made baby items, and these were brought to the church to be included in the boxes. As Pointe Claire is quite a large pharmaceutical manufacturing area, donations were given to USC. These did not go to the church but came to our house as it was felt that they would be safe there until picked up to be flown to the destination point. [I can't say that I thought it was a good idea to have multi hundreds \$\$\$'s of drugs in the house]. The church school made quilts to send to Korea, lots of fun and involved more than the children. Fathers using sewing machines were a great hit with the kids.

The Montreal church also had a packing team.

When we moved out here to Calgary in 1972, I became involved with USC here. I had been on the USC board for a number of years prior to moving. Lotta was quite clear that she wanted me to be her driver when she was in town, for she was used to me and felt that she did not need to entertain me. She could think about the interviews, etc that were coming up. This was fine with me.”

Rev. Charles Eddis, retired from the Montreal Church of the Messiah, Unitarian, shares these memories of Dr. Lotta.

“I can tell you one anecdote about her. She ruled the USC like a dictator. An Edmonton biochemist who had been a technical missionary in China in the 1930's went on the USC Board around 1960. He discovered the board was a rubber stamp. Lotta took up board meetings reporting on projects and announcing projects. The board was concerned that the USC depended so much on her personal involvement.

At one point, in the 1950's I expect, she was persuaded to take on an assistant. She took this person on her annual trip around the world checking on projects and on proposals for new ones. One day they found themselves in Greece, about 4:30 in the afternoon, having climbed a large hill or a small mountain for some time. At 4:30, the assistant proposed they stop for a few minutes to catch their breath and drink some tea. Lotta fired the assistant on the spot for lack of dedication to the job at hand!

I found her an approachable person. She seemed to be to be frank and open about what she experienced and how she felt about it.

The story is also told of her that during the Korean War, she went to the front to where the fighting was to see if there was a role for the USC. The military was reluctant to let her go where she wanted. Civilians were denied mobility. She, however, had her World War II type khaki uniform on (she always wore it), with her rows of ribbons. She barged in. No one stopped her.

She seemed to have a genuine interest in the people with whom she worked, and people she met.”

I also spoke with Joan McKeever from St. John's, who has been part of the USC group there since 1966. She remembers Lotta coming here to start her annual cross-Canada fundraising tour. Her first, and lasting impression, of Lotta is how small, even vulnerable, she was. She paid more attention to the children than to the adults. She went round to interviews with media that the local group had pre-arranged, and she had persuaded banks to offer their banking services free of charge. Lotta was renown for the thousands of thank you notes that she personally sent to everyone who gave money or time. Once you were on their lists, they didn't let you go.”

Lotta's whole life was the USC, according to Joan. She visited the projects around the world every year, and could report to Canadians on the children they had adopted in the developing world. She knew it all first hand, and so enraptured people with her stories.

Joan remembers her loving flowers, and so they always had flowers waiting for her in her hotel room. Someone commented, "Once you had been thanked by Dr. Hitschmanova, you came back to do more."

Elizabeth Bowen of Ottawa writes: "Older members (mostly women) of the congregation have told me many stories of the days when Lotta founded USC and turned the basement of that old stone building on Elgin St. into a USC office, clothes depot, work/storage room etc. I have a mental picture of the women of the congregation spending endless hours sorting and mending clothing, packing and shipping it to the countries that Lotta was focused on at the time.

I know that many of these women sincerely regretted the day when Lotta decided that the cost of shipping used clothing was too high and USC funds could be better spent "on the ground" in foreign lands. They missed the feeling of accomplishment and companionship that those work parties had provided. They also felt, I am sure a sense of ownership of the USC."

The Unitarian Service Committee provided a common mission for Canadian Unitarian congregations, many years prior to the formation of the Canadian Unitarian Council. These congregations were linked to the American Unitarian Association in Boston, but not very much to each other. Phillip Hewett comments, "There is no question but that the name Unitarian Service Committee gave us a much higher profile in the community at large than we had ever had before. When our members had occasion to mention to outsiders that they were Unitarians, rather than the blank stare, "What's that?" that had previously been the usual response, there was immediate recognition at least that we were the people who were associated with Lotta Hitschmanova's work." The Unitarian Service Committee was the way that Unitarians put their faith into action, without regard to the faith of the recipient. It went to those in need.

Although the USC's formal connection with the Unitarian churches ended in the late 50's, there are still many Unitarians involved with the USC. Not with packing clothes, but with fundraising generally. The Vancouver church sells items at a crafts table after church services to benefit the USC; other non-formal connections are still alive and well.

Dr. Hitschmanova spoke of her basic principles of giving aid when she gave the chancellor's Lecture at Brock University in 1973. She puts it this way, "to come as an open-minded friend and good listener when offering help; to say goodbye to a project when it can continue on its own; to serve with a personal touch, because a relationship of confidence must lift your aid beyond the realm of a simple business proposition and prove that you really care."

Dr. Lotta recognized that most people do not like to accept assistance if they cannot reciprocate. She established partnerships that placed responsibility on both donor and recipient. She felt it was just as important to withdraw that assistance when the recipient became able to manage their responsibilities on their own. Otherwise it dwarfs their sense

of responsibility and independence. She worked to put her projects out of business, or as a later executive director put it, “to free people to be on their own.”

Dr. Lotta called the USC “the agency with a heart.” She meant that the relationship between the donors and the recipients needs to be a relationship of peers, otherwise it would be degrading. She also kept good relationships with the donors across Canada, and the volunteers who spent so much time and effort for the cause. This is what so many people I heard from remember—that special relationship with Lotta.

Lotta would probably not have described herself as a feminist; her role models and mentors were men. The board presidents she worked with were men. Yet, her staff were all women, and most of the USC representatives she chose in Asia were women. Many project leaders were also women. Her biographer believes that she instinctively knew that their ideas on development would match her own.

Lotta went from being a refugee herself from Nazi Germany, to helping others escape the tyranny, to organizing systematic relief efforts, and later development projects all over the world. She was legendary for her ability to charm others into helping her, whether that be with small, and not so small, donations, free ads, cheap transportation of goods, and goodwill. Lotta Hitschmanova’s life stands as a model we can follow. She believed that one person of faith and goodwill, or a small group of people, can make changes on a one to one level. She loved people; indeed, she believed in people, and perhaps that is why so many responded to her appeal.

Hers is a story of a life well lived, putting her values to work every day. I personally am humbled by her example. Can I do as well, in my way, of course, of living my faith?

Reference

Lotta and the Unitarian Service Committee Story by Clyde Sanger (Toronto: Stoddart, 1986)

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