

Lotta Hitschmanova (1909-1990)

Adapted from a story by Rev. Margaret Gooding in “The Canadians, Adventures of our People”

*Throughout its history Unitarianism in Canada has grown and been strengthened by Unitarians from other countries who immigrated to Canada. One of these people is Lotta Hitschmanova. She lived from 1909 to 1990. She is recognized as a very important leader of Canadian Unitarians because her work began or strengthened the social action work of every Canadian Unitarian congregation. Her story is also interesting because it ties together two of the Unitarian groups and countries we're learning about in this curriculum: Canada and the Czech Republic. Here is Lotta's story.*

Growing up in a big, comfortable home in Prague, Czechoslovakia in the early 1900s, Lotta Hitschmanova had few responsibilities. Her father was a wealthy business man and there was plenty of help to care for the house and grounds. Lotta's main responsibility was her schooling which she loved, especially learning other languages. It fascinated her that there was more than one way to say words that meant the same thing ... nacht, nuit, night... German, French, English. These were the languages Lotta learned besides her native Czech. Her parents encouraged her in her studies and taught by their example values that were important to them. Her father was very hard working. He also cared about what happened to other people and so did Lotta's mother. It was from her that Lotta learned the importance of speaking more than one language as a way of getting to know people from other countries.

Lotta's parents were what is known as liberals, people who were concerned with the welfare and the rights of others, who believed in asking questions and thinking things through for one self, in expressing one's beliefs. They were friends of Dr. Norbert Chapek [Chah' peck], the founder of Unitarianism in Czechoslovakia. He was the minister who created the Flower Communion Service that many North American Unitarian Universalist churches use today. During the 1930s his congregation in Prague was the largest Unitarian congregation anywhere in the world.

Then in 1939 Nazis soldiers marched into Czechoslovakia and took over the country. It was the beginning of World War II. Live became dangerous for people like Dr. Chapek with liberal beliefs. Because he preached sermons that encouraged his congregation members to hope for a day when the Nazis would be defeated, Norbert Chapek was arrested, imprisoned, and eventually killed by the Nazis. Lotta, too, was in danger. She had grown up and become a journalist, and her concern for the welfare and rights of others had caused her to write some articles that criticized what the Nazis were doing, like taking over other countries and arresting people who spoke against them or were not of their same race or religion, and putting them into prisons called concentration camps. Lotta had to escape from Czechoslovakia.

Traveling alone, Lotta managed to go first to Belgium and then to the south of France. She was one of hundreds of refugees, hiding out from place to place, in barns, in cellars, in the woods, fleeing as the Nazi army advanced. Soon she had no money. During the many weeks it took her to reach safety she was almost always cold, hungry, and alone, and often she was afraid. Being able to speak four languages saved her life every day.

Lotta learned from her own experience how hard it is to stay alive when you are a refugee. She saw how terrible life was for the children who were escaping with their parents, and for the children who were trying to escape on their own without any adults to help them. She vowed that if she ever were free again, she would do all she could to help others who were helpless in times of war, especially children.

Things were safer for Lotta when she got to the south of France. She began to work with Americans from the Unitarian Service Committee who were in Southern France helping war refugees like herself. Eventually she was to move to Canada. It took seven long weeks for her ship to cross the Atlantic Ocean.

Three years later, never having forgotten her promise to herself to help the helpless, she started the Canadian Unitarian Service Committee, with the encouragement of the American Unitarian Service Committee and the help of people in the Ottawa Unitarian Church. The most important question she asked herself in deciding what kind of help was needed was, "What will keep children in war-torn countries alive and their families together?" Money for food and medicine began to come in to the Ottawa Unitarian Church from Unitarians and Universalists and then from many other people of every religion all over Canada. Eventually the Unitarian Churches in Montreal, Hamilton, Winnipeg, Toronto and Vancouver joined Ottawa in being collection points where blankets, baby clothes, scarves, mittens, jackets and shoes were collected and sent to children orphaned or abandoned in wars. Lotta was fulfilling the promise she had made to herself many years before to help children whose lives had been torn apart by war to create again safe and healthy lives for themselves.

Lotta started a Foster Parents program where a family in Canada, or a church group or Sunday school, could give help directly to a particular child. She began to be invited to visit and advise countries where there were refugees from wars, famines, floods. She wore a uniform to identify herself as coming from the USC. She talked to the people in need, becoming their friend, listening very carefully to what they had to say. Together they would plan ways the local people could solve their own problems and learn new skills to become self-sufficient. Then she would write back home to USC headquarters, letting the people in Canada know what projects were needed to help the children and their parents. She always tried to send photographs to make the lives and needs of the refugees more real to the Canadians.

In thanks for her work Lotta was given many awards, including high honors from the governments of France, Greece, and India. She was made a Companion of the Order of Canada, Canada's highest honor. A bronze bust of her made by sculptor Harold Pfeiffer stands in the Worship Hall of the First Unitarian Congregation of Ottawa, where she was a member. These are all great honors, but equally important to her are the gifts made for her by children around the world whom she has helped. Dolls, needlepoint, embroidery, carvings, pictures fill the shelves and covered the walls of her office at USC headquarters on Sparks Street in Ottawa. In her files were treasured letters from children and grownups whose lives have been changed because of USC projects.

Lotta Hitschmanova worked for a kinder world for tomorrow's children and showed us ways we can do this too.