

# *Croatia*

## *January 1995*

**Old wounds and new wars**



Graves, military cemetery,



Angry meeting, Zagreb—  
“What damned good does your praying do in the  
peaceful streets of Zagreb?  
Go to the concentration camps run by the Serbs!”



Dance band,



Lipik



Lipik

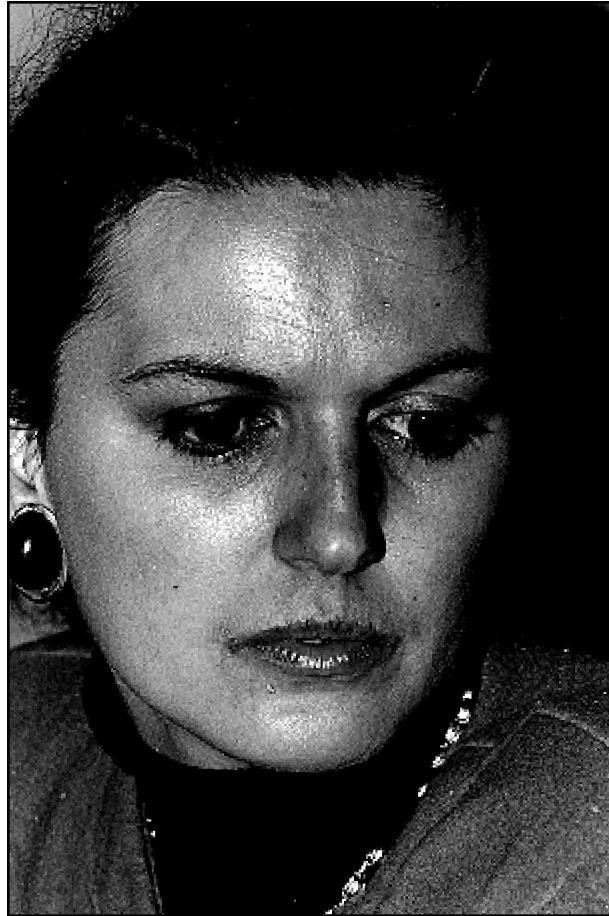


Lipik



Lipik





Dr. Topic, founder of the orphanage, Home of Hope



Singing at an ecumenical church service in Zagreb—Muslims, Catholics, Jews, and Eastern

## Split, Croatia

I saw Olga as we left the ferry from Rejeca to Split. She'd volunteered to host some of us pilgrims in her home. I was immediately attracted by something shining in her countenance, also something long-suffering. No question in my mind about who of the ten or so potential hosts I'd ask to share hospitality with.

Robert, I said, *time to move!* Robert was my buddy in the Balkans—we looked out for each other, helped each other survive what might be war conditions, the winter, the mountains, made sure neither was left behind if one became ill or wounded or lost. Robert, totally blind, committed to the entire walk, Auschwitz to Hiroshima.

We had arrived in the early morning in Split, ferrying along the Adriatic coast all night. I watched the glimmering lights of Italy on the port side, the relatively dark shore of Croatia on the starboard. Although the season was winter—January 1995—and we'd just walked nearly three weeks through Poland, Czech Republic and Austria marking the 50th anniversary of World War II's end, through cold, snow, rain, ice, fog and smog, we were now thrilled by a balmy climate. Lettuce was about ready for harvesting, wild flowers were in bloom, we could sit for hours without jackets sipping cappuccino fifty feet from the Adriatic



Olga

Sea. Not a bad life for pilgrims on their way to Bosnia.

Olga was short, blond, curvaceous, reminding me of Lynn, my former wife. Olga looked sturdy. I thought she might be pugnacious, hardened by the conditions of war. In Split we were a mere twenty

miles from the front, the border of Bosnia and Croatia. Active fighting was that close, even though Split itself, the ancient city founded by Romans, had experienced only one brief attack, leaving no casualties and virtually no damage. Unlike its neighbor, Dubrovnik, under siege for months, and clearly not Sarejevo, where the rate of dying had reached over 1,000 deaths monthly, certainly not Mostar with its blown up bridges, Split seemed an idyl. Earlier, World War II had visited the same

region, contributing to a 500 hundred year period of strife, peace, and changing national orientation, cycling, endlessly cycling.

Besides Robert and I, three other pilgrims—Richard from England and the two Germans, Castoen and Amien—raised hands for Olga's hospitality. The five of us piled into her small car for the short drive to her home. She seemed excited, greeted us in English, said the homestays had been coordinated by her religious community, Si Baba, along with the Franciscan monastery. She was eager to tell us about Si Baba, the relatively new religion based in India com-

binning all the major faith traditions, if we wanted to hear. She said she wished to listen to some of our stories. I was intrigued and very attracted by something mysteriously vivacious in her, despite the context of war.

Croatia and its adjoining region, Slovenia, had been the first units of the former Yugoslavia to secede from the nation. War ensued. The full weight of the former Yugoslavian army was arrayed against these seceding sectors, now recognized by many foreign governments as separate nations. Despite the lack of physical damage in Split, we were to learn of the deeper and more enduring damage to psyches, the internal wreckage so difficult to notice or to heal.

Olga, a radiologist serving on the front, introduced us to her husband, Toni, owner of a small import-export business, and their ten year old son, Marjan, an avid soccer player. Marjan was shy about trying out the English he'd been learning in school. We were to rest four days in Split, before setting off for our walk along the coast, through Makarska, Omis, up over the mountains through Vgorac and Medugorje, crossing into Bosnia and then into what had been the cultural center of southern Bosnia-Herzegovina, Mostar. This was to be a respite from the arduousness

of our previous month: Auschwitz to Vienna by foot, and then Zagreb, the capital of Croatia and what faced us in Bosnia. I looked forward to home-cooked Croatian food and a bed rather than a



Toni and Olga's apartment  
(Toni on left, friend on right)

floor. Perhaps also an uncrowded bath, and a leisurely squat on the toilet.

**T**heir home was small, an apartment in a large block of similar units, four rooms, including the kitchen-dining room. One room was Olga and Toni's, one Marjan's, leaving one for us. This was not quite large enough for four men and a woman, so Marjan gave us his room, and shared his parent's.

A stream of visitors appeared: Thomas, a young partner in Toni's business, very handsome and fit, but looking haggard, distraught. I suspected an illness at his core that he couldn't cover with the many glasses of wine he drank while with us; Stevo, Olga's cousin, a physical education teacher in a local high school, robust, affable, generous, very sprightly and outward, with a boyish spirit; and another young man who leaned dangerously far back on his chair while swilling wine.

Over the days, stories emerged. Toni—his income had been

reduced from a yearly profit of \$40,000 three years ago, before the war started, to about one tenth that last year. His low income notwithstanding, Toni treated us to coffee, snacks, postcards, and taxi rides. His generosity was boundless. Thomas—formerly a soldier, now loose, wandering, even though partnered in business with Toni. Stevo—his mother Serbian, his father Ukranian, born and educated in Croatia, just as we were visiting Split, gained his Croatian citizenship. It had been delayed because of his suspect origins. This frustration despite serving in the Croatian navy, despite instituting a sports training program for the military and despite his founding and coaching the judo teams for youth which won highest international honors. Olga—her Serbian parents lived in Bosnia. Last year her father killed himself, despairing of the war, and now, because of the conflict separating regions and destroying intercommunication, Olga can not speak with or write to her mother. Her mother has chosen to remain in Bosnia near her husband's grave.

**A**nd Marjan—a boy who witnesses all this suffering. not the physical destruction of war when the fighting is nearby, but the devastating effects of living with hatred, division, removal, disappearance, torture, and killing. What will he become? What will his flower be?

Marjan skillfully and with gusto played soccer with Castoen.

Proudly he showed us his school books. He spoke English with us in a solemn tone, not fully sure of himself, and also perhaps mildly distrustful of us. Who were we to wander in, wander through, and soon be gone, perhaps never to be in touch again? As heartbreaking

as these quick junctions and disjunctions can be to us adult pilgrims—one of the most painful parts of pilgrimage for me—how much more painful might this phenomenon be for a child, especially one in a war situation? His grandfather had just killed himself, friends of his family were dying or leaving, alcohol pervaded some lives. The guns could not be heard at the distance of twenty miles, but the insidious psychic destruction of war permeated Split, Croatia and the Balkans. War incinerates the spirit.

With the war as backdrop, Zagreb had been exhilarating for us. Partly because we were among the first in the last four years to go between various religious communities—Muslim, Catholic, Jewish, Eastern Orthodox Christian. Partly because we'd been part of a packed church celebrating an interfaith service in the pilgrimage's honor. A retired Eastern Orthodox priest, Father Nakovitch, spoke, as did the abbot of the Zagreb Jesuit monastery, one of our hosts. Father Nakovitch told us, *When we kill, we inherit the unrepented sins of our victims*. We sung prayers from Judaism, led by Jews, chanted the Buddhist syllables of our pilgrimage, *Namu Myoho Renge Kyo*, to the beat of Japanese drums, heard a sung Sufi prayer and joined in,



Marjan

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*Ishkela Maba Lela* (“the lover, the beloved, god, all one”), and saw a Native American ceremony honoring the four directions. No one of the Islamic faith appeared that evening, but we had earlier visited a mosque and heard from the *mufti* (priest).

**N**ow, in Split, Olga invited all of us to a Sai Baba service. Sai Baba is humble, exuberant, accepting—and syncretic. It combines elements from the Hindu, Christian, Buddhist, and Muslim paths. Its appeal has burgeoned among Croatians, as has participating by others in the Catholic church. Toni attends the Catholic church. Marjan participates in both communities. In Lipik, a small war-ravaged village near Zagreb, Dr. Topic earlier had explained, *We are experiencing a spiritual renaissance. In some cases, the war opens the heart; while in others, war closes the heart. Trying to find a nonviolent way out of the conflict and to abandon the instinct for revenge, we are seeking the eternal.*

The cafes were loaded with youth sipping coffee or alcoholic drinks. This presaged what we were to see in Mostar. A byproduct of war is boredom. Little music or cinema or theater or visual art, education curtailed, sports limited, all attention goes to the fighting.

500 years ago, the area had been settled by the Romans. In a place called Saloniae, *place of the sun*, about ten miles from Split, the Roman city of thousands thrived for 1200 years, to 700 of the present era (P.E.). It was eventually destroyed by Huns and Mongols. Stevo took Marianne and me to walk through the amphitheater which once held 12,000 people watching the gladia-

tors. Diocletian, a Roman emperor living about 295 P.E., had built his retirement palace in what is now Split. The palace is now an arcade, or would be if not for the war. 1,000 years after the birth of Christ, Christians erected a church inside the palace complex, the first Christian church in the region. At the moment of church construction, Islam was just 200 years old, struggling with Christians for hegemony. One of many conflicts continuing to the present moment.

War nearby yet the presence of the soft Adriatic light. It bathes us in its warm glow. We sit for long moments basking in it. We climb the hills of Split, or stroll along the waterfront, never far from the light. All beings are rendered internally lit, or their inner lights are sparked alive by this Mediterranean light. I revel in it, my Quaker heritage of the light within assumes new meaning, I find myself photographing in an inspired manner.

Finally, after four days in Split, we leave for Mostar. And return to Split two weeks later on our way to Budapest where we hope to gain Serbian visas, roundabout because of the war. On our second Split visit we tell stories to Olga, Toni and Marjan, thank them again for nourishing us on our way to Bosnia and now Serbia. Olga had helped heal Claude who was suffering from intense stomach pain. Toni sent us off with bundles of food for the long bus ride to Zagreb. I waved goodbye to Marjan, not sure of his future, he the harbinger of the next generation.

—*Skip Schiel*



Croatian soldier learning to fold  
Japanese peace cranes



Along the Dalmatian Coast





From the Dalmatian coast into Bosnia

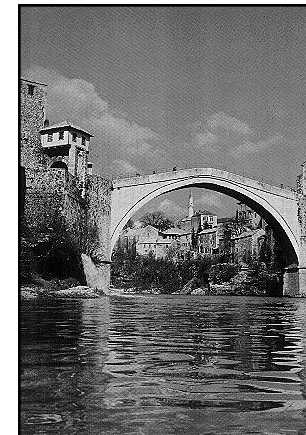


Heidrun Hartman, one of the advance team to Mostar, on a bus through southern Bosnia



***Bosnia-Herzegovina***  
***January 1995***

**Especially Mostar, once the cultural center of the region**



From a postcard bought in

*Stari Most*, Old Bridge, before the war



Mostar—site of Stari Most



Young men in club house,  
with gift of peace crane,  
Mostar (east side)



Mostar (east side)



Mostar (east side)

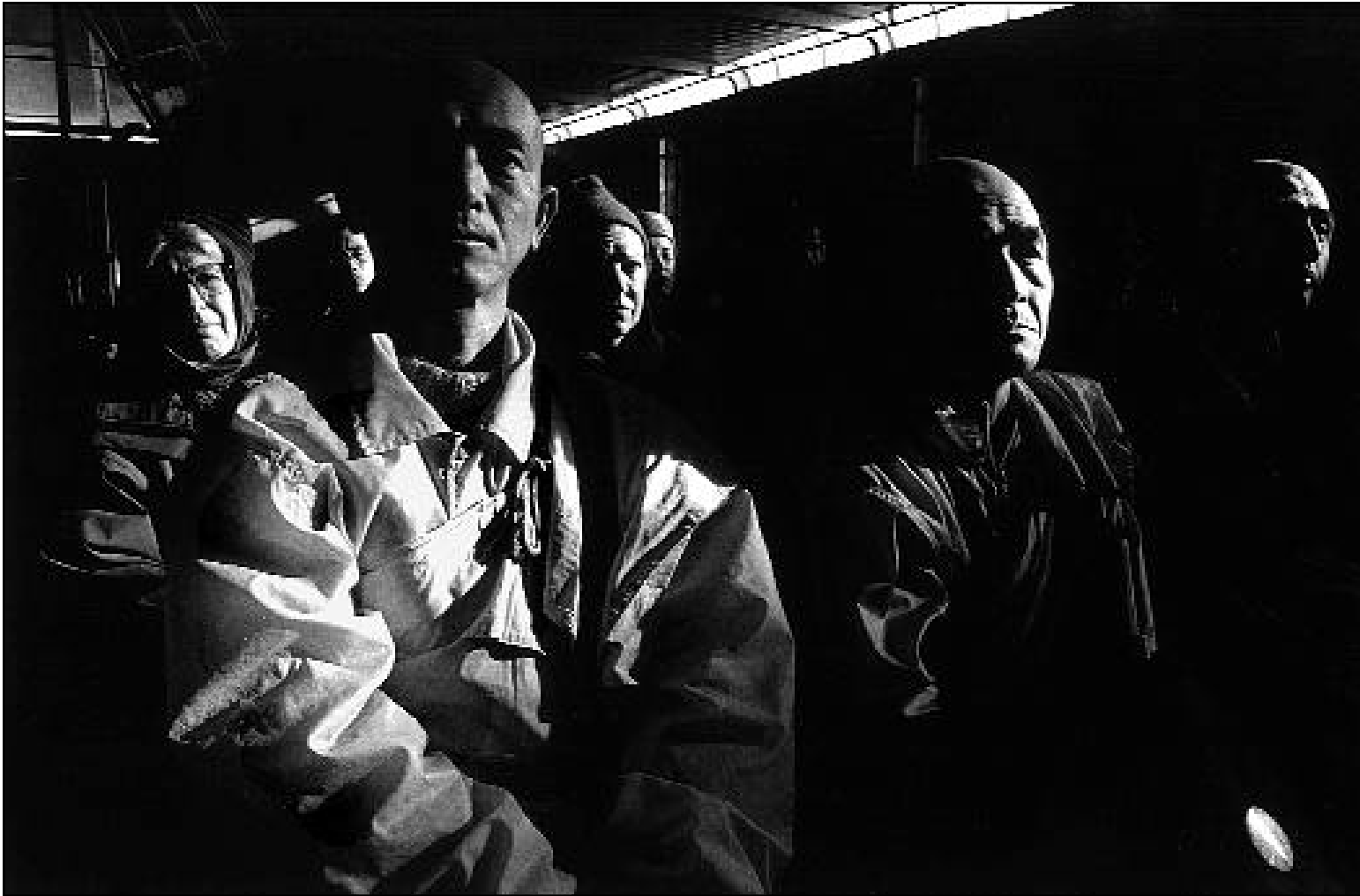


Bombed Catholic church,  
several weeks after Christmas  
("MIR" means peace in  
Serbo-Croatian),  
Mostar (west side)





Interfaith prayer



Inside a Catholic cathedral, Mostar (west



Fasting and praying, Mostar (west side)

## The Sutton Family

**A**s I was walking to our residence after a long day exploring the city, I had no idea a chance meeting with several pilgrims in a cafe would result in my meeting the Sutton family. A few pilgrims had met the two young men of the family, Zoren and Srdan, earlier. They'd visited our early morning interfaith prayer service. Pieces of story about the family floated through our community. Zoren a former soldier fighting in Mostar, was now a city policeman. His father, Boris, currently an officer in the Bosna Herceg army, was home on leave.

When I and three pilgrims arrive at their apartment block, all is dark. The electricity had again inexplicably disappeared. Zoren leads us up with a flashlight. This could be a movie theater, Zoren the usher, cheerily showing us to our seats, but warning us, the movie will frighten you.

In the third floor apartment, candles flicker and kerosene lamps burn steadily in the darkness. The room is small and warm, a long sofa on one side, a few chairs elsewhere, and the compact kitchen off to one side. As my eyes adapt to the light I see the faces of the Sutton family—the same people who had brought us tea while we fasted and prayed on Mostar's west side.

We talk of that day, the cold, the wind, the isolation we experienced, and how gladdened we were when the family appeared with tea. Marija and her husband now bring us tea and cookies. Sorry, she says, dinner has to wait until the we get electricity again. She

sells sundries in one of many small stalls dotting the Mostar streets. Boris, her husband, periodically steps onto the porch to smoke a cigarette. He commands 120 men in his duty area north of the city. He soldiers one day in every three, home for the remaining two. Their two sons, Zoren and Srdan, live at home. Srdan, 15 years old, is a student at the electrical polytechnical school. Zoren, older by

five years, fought in the local war, now guards abandoned buildings as part of his policeman's duties in the city.

When the war struck Mostar in 1991 they fled to Zagreb to live with friends. Two months later they returned to Mostar. Why, we asked, with the destruction and fear here? They replied, It is our home, we could not stay away. Before the war, Boris assembled airplanes at the local Boeing factory. Srdan would like to be just like his father, employed as machinist or electrician in a factory. Zoren once aspired to become a doctor, but now is unsure of his path. Will the

war flame up again? None could answer. It sleeps like a monster with one eye open, infecting all in its presence with its power.

**M**onica had warned me that neither Boris nor Zoren liked talking about their war experiences. So I do not ask questions. Instead, I offer a recent dream about being under bombardment "Yes," they exclaim, "that is exactly how it was, the whistling shells, the flashes of light, the rattling windows and shaking buildings, that feeling of horror and helplessness, twenty four hours a day."

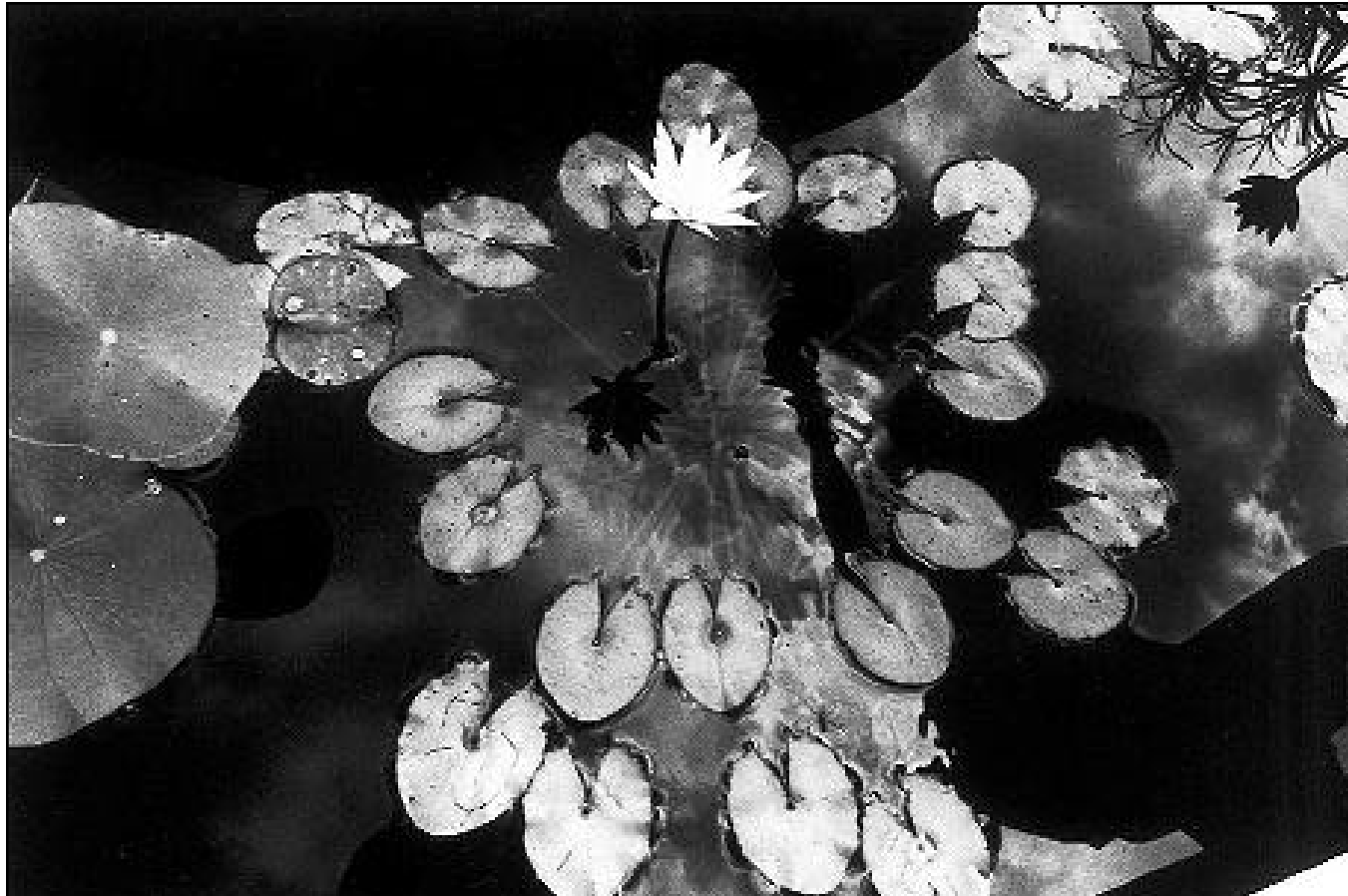


The Sutton family, with pilgrims, Mostar

They speak of both the smell of war and their hatred for the extreme nationalist Serbs and Muslims whom they hold responsible for the ravaging of Mostar. Zoren's woman friend, a Muslim, was forced with other Muslims from her residence in west Mostar to the east sector. They have not seen each other. Despite my not to raise painful memories, Zoren and Boris, son and father, step nearer and nearer that black hole of suffering and despair. They are drawn by the powerful magnet of memory. Step too near and you fall in, never to climb out. Feel the overwhelming power of fear and hatred. The desire to kill.

**T**hen we sing. They sing us Croatian love songs, we sing them North and South American songs of struggle and solidarity. All of us together sing—or chant—our prayer for peace: Namu Myoho Renge Kyo. And laughed and laughed, and hugged. They offered me a bath, my first in weeks, and pleaded with us to remain overnight. “You are here with us for such a short time, let's make the most of it.”

—*Skip Schiel*



Lotus blossoms, Philippines