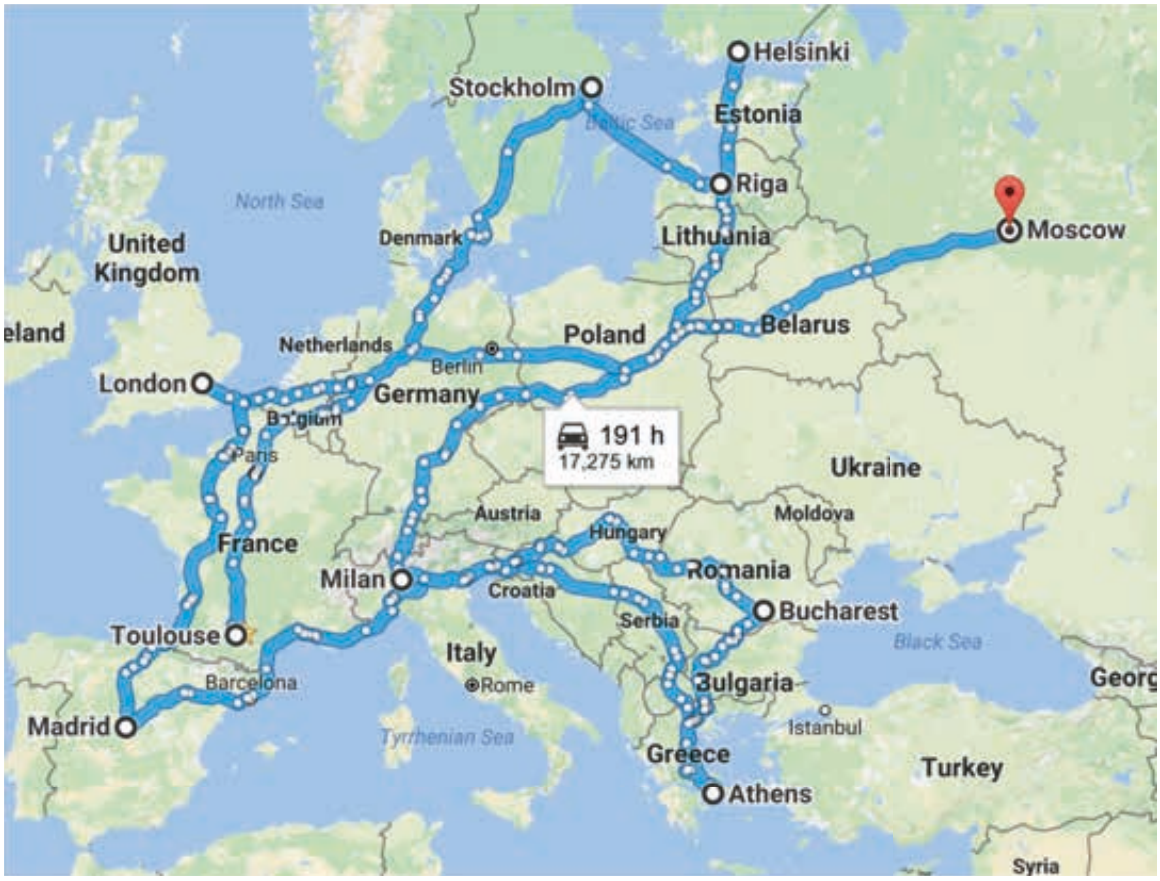
POSTCARD 77 FROM ROBINA, RIGA, JANUARY 30, 2017

I left off postcard 76 with this: "Tomorrow, Friday January 13, I fly to Stockholm, via London. In Sweden for two weeks, the UK for two months, then other bits of Europe till mid-July." Actually, I missed out a place: Martigny in Switzerland. Francois, Violette and I did a quick roundtrip from Toulouse for the weekend of



January 7 and 8, to the centre there, Gendun Drup. We flew to Geneva and then took a train into the mountains. My first time here. It was snowy and predictably cold. On the above map, it's to the right of "France" and just above the "i" of "Milan." But first we went for a walk around Lake Geneva and had afternoon tea in an old hotel.

I spent another week at Institut Vajra Yogini, relaxing. Every year I come here and schedule in at least a couple of weeks of time off or for editing – which feels like time off.

Since I'd agreed to go to Lawudo in April (see postcard 73), I tried to keep to my promise to get fit in time for that walk up in the Himalayas. My room at the institute is on the fourth floor, and for a while, indeed, I would put on my trekking boots and walk and up and down the back stairs. But it didn't last long. I'm bone lazy.

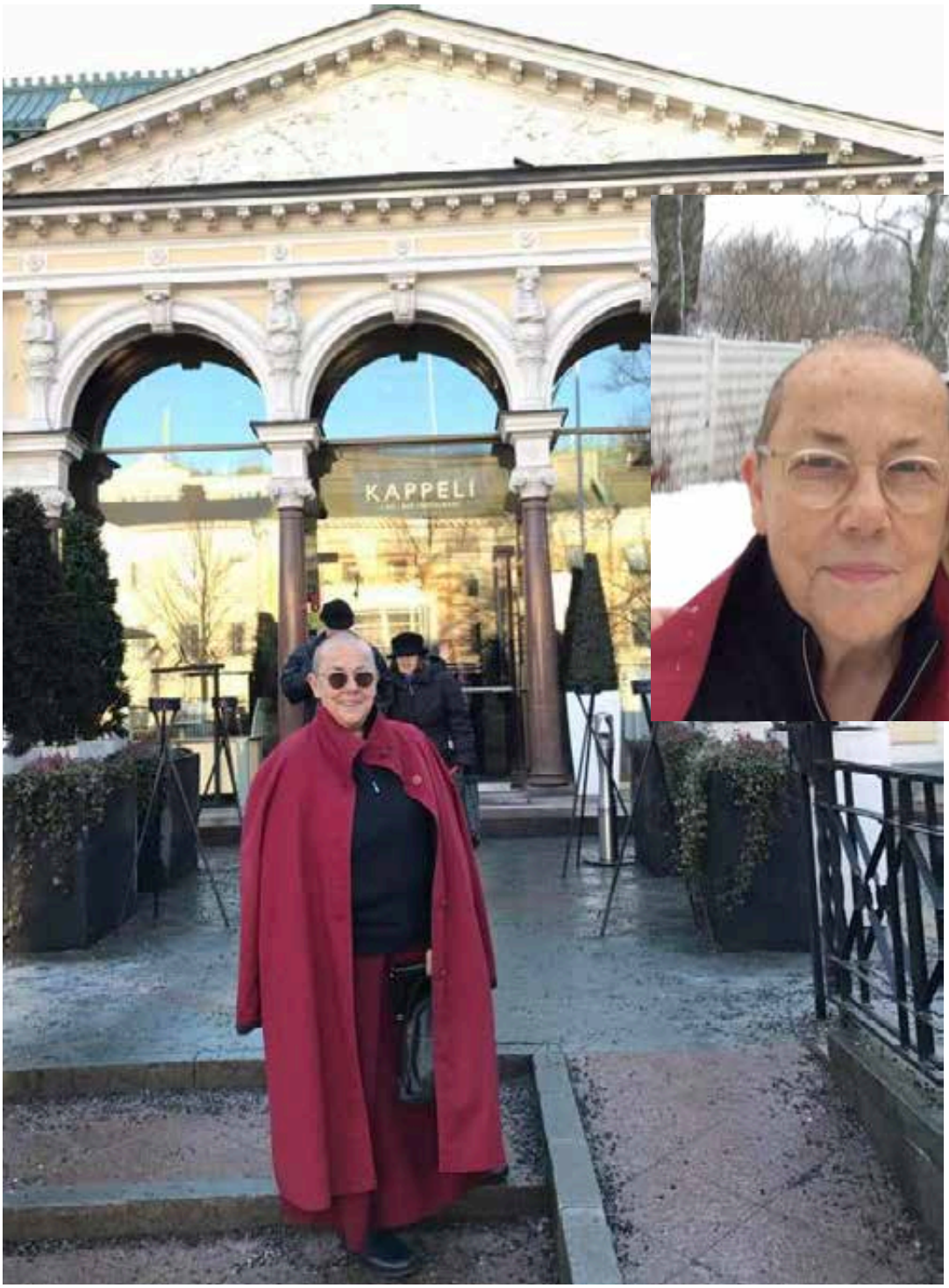
With Jean Paul, who runs the centre, and his wife in Martigny, **above**, *and,* **below**, *with Ven. Rita. Leaving Martigny for the airport with François.*

Afternoon tea in an old Geneva hotel,* above; *Stockholm; and with Celeste Dumbanengueby at the center.

Then it was on to Sweden, Stockholm first then to Gothenburg. I like Stockholm. Martin Strom is doing a good job there.

He's being creative in his efforts to grow the center. For years he's been using the space kindly offered by Dromtonpa Centre, and now wants to find his own place.

Finland next, where Stina Hanhirova runs Tara Liberation Study Group in Helsinki. We had a day in town, for afternoon tea again. I like walking around cities better than in the countryside. I'm happy the trees are there, I just don't need to see them, that's all. I'm serious. I much prefer cities.



With Stina in Helsinki, and our venue for afternoo n tea.

Let's face it, it's actually better that we leave the trees alone; let them get along with doing their job without human interference. Cities, though: they're full of people, and they're the ones who need us. But we feel the opposite. As soon as we see all those people crowding the streets, filling the buildings, driving the cars, we feel aversion for them. We want to run away into the trees! It should be the other way around – at least, that's how bodhisattvas would feel. The more people the better! Grist for their mill.

One discovery in Helsinki was my new walking shoes. I'd bought a pair of trekking boots in Kathmandu. I walked in them a few times, and they were okay But they were so heavy, and hard, and inflexible. I started reading websites about walking in mountains. So much information! People practically write theses about which shoes are the best! I came across some minimalist walkers, and they dismissed the idea about needing shoes with ankle support, heavy shoes, etc., etc. That made sense to me. Finally, I found a company in the States called Evolv: I loved their shoes! And it just happened to be that a shop in Helsinki had a pair: light canvas, with thin strong soles excellent for grip. Perfect. I've decided I'll bring the big fat ones as well, just in case it snows.

Then to Riga in Latvia, via London. As with all of Europe it's two years since I was here last. Agnese still runs the center and is helped by her new spiritual program coordinator Inga. Again this year we visited a hospital where they deal with sick and dying children. Parents and workers came to the talk.

It's a difficult discussion to have in the West. We can't face the death even of old people; children dying is unbearable for us. It seems so utterly wrong. But when we can get to grips with Buddha's view about karma – why things happen – then at least we have a way to explain it, to counteract the instinctive assumption that it *shouldn't* happen.

At a children's hospital in Riga that deals with sick and dying children; parents and workers attended the discussion.

For Buddha, the main reason we think death is so terrible, so wrong – that it *shouldn't* happen – is because we have such instinctive attachment to our loved ones, etc., that we just can't bear the thought of being separated from them. On the basis of the first misconception of attachment the gasping at things as unchanging kicks in.

These misconceptions are so primordial that we don't even think of them as misconceptions; they're just the truth for us. At least if we can start to find an answer to *why* our baby dies – and that's always the first question we ask when something goes wrong: why? – then we can start to accept the reality of it.

Buddha's being quite literal when he says the main reason we suffer is our delusions, our misconceptions. But to see them we need to dig deep inside.

I love that story at the time of the Buddha about the mother who literally could not face the reality of the death of her baby. He heard about this enlightened being and was convinced he could bring her baby back to life, so begged him to do so. Seeing her pain, he agreed. "But first," he said, "I want you to bring me a mustard seed from a house where no one has ever died." She was ecstatic, so rushed off to do his bidding. And, of course, she could not find a household where no one had died. The reality of death became evident to her. She mightn't

have discovered the reason for the death, but she at least understood the utter naturalness of it.

End of January and now I'm off to London for the next two months in the UK.

Agnese, Rita, and Inga making offerings;* left, *at the children's hospital – wearing my new shoes!