



## 'PAS UN PAS SANS BATA': THE BATA SHOE COMPANY IN CANADA

Alexandra Kordoski

Nicholls Library Fellow, Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library

**T**HE FISHER LIBRARY recently received a significant donation of archival material from the Bata Shoe Company. Researchers may wonder what connection the Fisher Library has to the Bata shoe empire, aside from our being neighbours to the north at the Bata Shoe Museum at the corner of St. George and Bloor. But our mandate to collect material of Canadian national significance compels us to look beyond what might be considered our central subject strengths of literature, science and philosophy. This donation will complement our growing collections in the history of economics and the development of labour movements while supporting our broader aim of preserving the histories of immigrants to Canada.

The T. & A. Baťa Shoe Company was founded in 1894 in Zlín, Moravia (now the Czech Republic), by siblings Tomáš, Antonín and Anne Baťa, descendants of a family of cob-

blers. What began as a small, family enterprise, expanded over the course of the century to over ninety countries to become the largest and, at times, the most successful shoe manufacturer and retailer in the world. By the 1930s and 40s, while other companies floundered due to the Depression, Bata factories were still expanding and producing a whole range of commercial and industrial products, including rubber tiles, textiles, paper, chemicals, and electric motors. As Anthony Cekota, life-long Bata employee and biographer of the Bata enterprise boldly claims, "in its concept of industry, its philosophy of business and its administrative and managerial system, Bata had found the answer to the Depression and to the great problems of modern industry." Indeed, Bata's success in the interwar period can be attributed to its innovations in many areas, including product development, technical engineering, and in socially-oriented employment practices.

Documentation related to all of these innovations can be found in the Bata archive in the form of carefully kept administrative records, staff training manuals, financial files, and internal company memos.

Canada played a critical role in the development and survival of the Bata Shoe Company following the Depression and World War II. Thomas J. Bata (son of founder Tomáš Baťa), faced with the threat of Hitler's invasion of Czechoslovakia, immigrated to Canada to establish a North American outpost for the company that would operate safely beyond the economic effects of the war. He brought along with him just 160 employees, a thousand manufacturing machines, and enough material to produce the first 100,000 pairs of shoes. He faced substantial resistance from existing Canadian companies and consumers, and from the Canadian government, which balked at the notion of a foreign company entering the

**OPENING PAGE:** A scrapbook from leatherworker Jan Polášek, who worked for Bata in Zlin. The book includes scraps of leather and manuscript notes that outline how to treat each leather chemically, ca. 1910. **BELOW, LEFT TO RIGHT:** The opening of a Bata shoe store in Sudan, North Africa in 1966. An advertisement for canvas shoes from the original T. & A. Baťa shoe company in Zlin, ca. 1910.



local manufacturing market at such a politically tumultuous time. Yet Bata succeeded in breaking through. Thomas J. Bata describes in his autobiography how, in a remarkable testament to the efficiency and organization of the company, the first pairs of Bata shoes produced on Canadian soil were finished just two months after the first Bata employees had arrived. Aside from shoes, the Bata machines in Canada would produce important wartime munitions, including highly specialized instruments that could not be manufactured elsewhere. Bata's holdings in Czechoslovakia were nationalized in 1945, but due to much forethought and careful planning by Thomas J. Bata and the strength of their Canadian outpost in Ontario, the Bata company was able to restructure and recover quickly as what would become the Bata Shoe Organization.

The Ontario manufacturing plant Thomas J. Bata established grew into a thriving worker community, named "Batawa" (a *portmanteau* of Bata and Ottawa), and was a manifestation of the Bata company's motivating business principle: to provide shoes to as many as possible, while improving the lives of workers and their surrounding communities. As documents and correspondence in the archive reveal, Thomas J. Bata lived by this principle himself, personally overseeing the emigration of many of the first Canadian employees and their families from Czechoslovakia. The plant at Batawa eventually employed some 1200 people, both Czech immigrants and local Ontarians,

while providing them with affordable housing, health care, sports and recreation programmes, and access to training and education. The plant was closed in 2000 when the company's major manufacturing centre shifted back to Europe. Batawa, however, still exists today as a small but thriving community.

Bata established similar worker communities at many of its international outposts. Each Bata company was managed locally and autonomously, in a highly decentralized system they sometimes referred to internally as an 'industrial democracy' and externally as the Bata system of management. While the Bata archive at the Fisher consists mainly of records from Bata's Canadian headquarters, it includes material relating to all of the company's international sites. The most compelling material includes photographs of factories and workers in parts of India, Bangladesh, and rural Africa, where the arrival of the Bata enterprise marked the very beginning of large-scale industrial development in those regions.

Thomas J. Bata and his wife, Sonja Bata, settled in Canada as the company moved its headquarters from Zlin to Toronto following the war. It is thanks to Sonja Bata, who played a significant role in the company herself as Director of the Bata Shoe Organization and the Bata Shoe Museum, that the company's archive exists today and that it is now available to the public at the Fisher Library. The donation is extensive at over three hundred boxes, and its content ranges from corporate

records from Bata companies' various departments—including the human resources, commercial, legal, and technical departments—to personal Bata family records. It includes a large amount of audio-visual material in the form of photographs, slides, recorded speeches, and films. These unique formats complement the archive's textual records, while offering a compelling glimpse into the day-to-day operations of many Bata factories. The archive as a whole focuses for a large part on Thomas J. and Sonja Bata and their professional, social, and philanthropic activities as heads of the Bata enterprise. There is evidence throughout, particularly in correspondence and photographs, of their life-long devotion to the company and its people.

Because of the company's unique organizational structure and international scope, the archive will be of interest to many topics: business and manufacturing history; social labour practices and labour relations; and the globalization of economic and industrial development during and after the Second World War. But it will also be of interest to any of us who recognize the iconic and everyday shoes that Bata helped to develop: the rubber flip-flop, the suede desert boot, and the simple canvas tennis shoe. Many Canadians played a vital role in the success of this truly unique company, and the Fisher Library is pleased to be able to preserve and share this history.