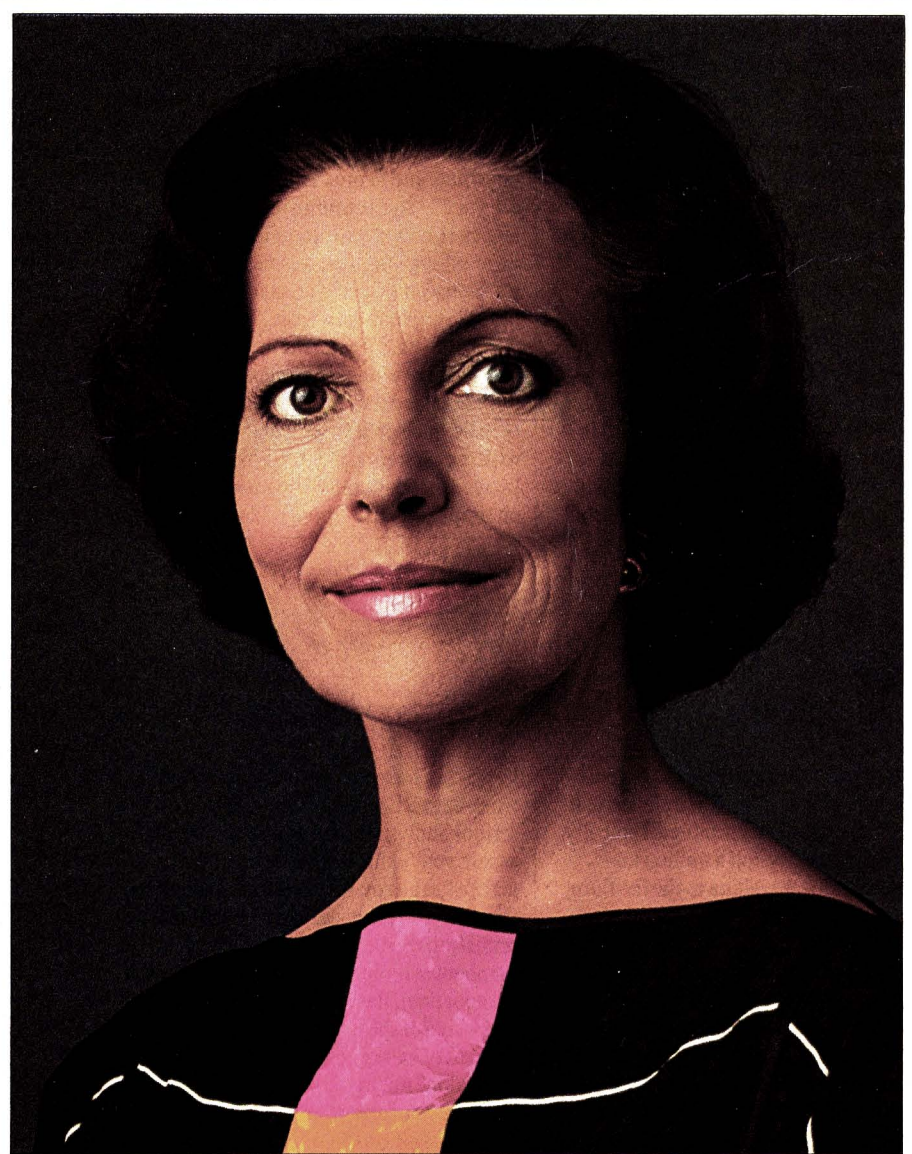


# BUSINESS

**THE  
POWER  
AND  
INFLUENCE  
OF  
SONJA BATA**



*Mrs. Thomas J. Bata has never been content to stand in her husband's shadow. More often than not she steals the spotlight/By Wendy Dennis*

**T**wenty years ago, when Pietro Annigoni had the opportunity to paint a portrait of Sonja Bata at 36, he must have blessed his good fortune. Before him sat a woman with the architectural features great artists must dream of painting—the patrician forehead melting into the strong nose,

the alabaster skin, and the cheekbones carved in high relief. It must have been tempting, confronted by a subject of such classical beauty, to play it straight—to cast her as Helen and paint the kind of face that would have launched a thousand ships. But Annigoni was on to her. So there sits this lady, with primly clasped hands, only some-

thing funny—Mona Lisa funny—is happening around the mouth. And the backswept dark hair, isn't it just a trifle unkempt for a portrait of Her Eminence, the Shoe Queen? It's the eyes, though, where the artist slips in his deft coup de grâce. Annigoni has fixed it so that they follow you around the room wherever you stand and gaze. With utterly disarming femininity, those eyes settle rule number one straightaway: *don't mess with me*. There are many discoveries to make about Sonja Bata, but the first and most important one is that she is considerably more than just another pretty face.

For nearly thirty-seven years Sonja Bata has been married to Tom Bata. "When I was a teenager," she said, addressing a recent gathering, "I thought I was going to be the world's greatest architect, but then I married a shoe man." If Tom Bata is a "shoe man," then he's one who, as Peter Newman says, "should have been born a cardinal in fourteenth-century Florence, privy councillor to the Pope." Tom Bata makes shoes, but he makes more shoes than anyone else on the planet. In the non-Communist world, that means one out of every three pairs sold. Last year, the Batas employed 83,000 workers in ninety-three countries, managed 5,900 retail

household name." The global nature of the Bata Shoe Organization lures its owners regularly into the bosom of royalty and senior government people, particularly in the Third World. A sentimental journey for Sonja Bata through a personal memorabilia file consists of unearthing curling photographs of herself with such people as King Hussein and the prime minister of Malaysia. "Oh, here I am with Paul Getty," is the sort of thing she can and does say. "As I recall, I was trying to get some money out of him."

According to Monte Hummel, executive director of World Wildlife Fund Canada, an organization of which Bata is chairman, Bata is the sort of person who can drop in anywhere and people say, "Oh Sonja, how are you?" "She's quite an internationalist and can give you an international perspective on anything—politics, business or economics. You want to get in or out of China in a hurry? Sonja can arrange it."

As Tom Bata's wife, she might well have chosen a more languid existence. She could have attended the requisite number of charity balls, and spent the rest of the time dealing with the caterers and getting her nails done. Instead, her nails seem to be somewhat low on the priority list. Though Tom Bata insists

and internationally, she also is a member of the Canadian Advisory Council of the Shastri Indo-Canadian Institute and acts as vice-chairman of the Ontario Bicentennial Advisory Commission. Bata has been a member of the national board and executive council of the Canadian Chamber of Commerce, a board member of the Art Gallery of Ontario, and has worked actively for the Girl Guide World Association. And she was recently appointed to the Order of Canada. Two universities have awarded her honorary degrees and she speaks five languages, one of which, Spanish, she learned when a riding accident temporarily landed her flat on her back, shackled to a Stryker frame ("You see, everything has a good side").

When John Devlin, chairman of Rothmans of Pall Mall Canada Ltd., and chairman of the Council for Business and Arts in Canada, was asked whether Bata could ever be compartmentalized as the wife of a rich man, he doubled over in laughter. "Oh my God, no. There's no way Sonja is going to sit home and do needlepoint. She'd go right up the wall and drive everybody else crazy at the same time." C.B. Marsh, a recently retired Bata executive, saw the issue in the context of his boss's gift for creative problem-solving: "If Sonja Bata had to stay home to do needlepoint, she'd begin by making a Bayeux tapestry, and when she'd finished with that project, she'd build a needlepoint factory."

According to her husband, who has been known to leave Milan at daybreak, hop the Concorde in Paris, and whip up from New York to Toronto in time to attend a Royal Winter Fair luncheon, Bata's worst fault is her penchant for leaving him stranded in an airport somewhere on the other side of the globe while she scoots off to fulfill one of her commitments. Their mutual schedules are charted on a monthly master plan whose legend alone would require at least one honorary degree to decipher. If, in some languages, Bata is the only word for shoe, it might well also deserve to become the only word for stamina. "The thing you've got to remember about Sonja," says Monte Hummel, "is that whenever you see her she's just been to nineteen board meetings, then it's down to the opera and she's probably got to get up at the crack of dawn to catch a plane for Zaïre."

CARO is Bataspeak for Central Africa, LATAM for Latin America and MERO for the Middle East. Bata shoes tramp across many diverse political soils, and although Tom escaped, by just a whisper, the crunch of the Nazi boot, Bata-made boots are worn by soldiers in regimes where much remains to be shouted loudly from rooftops. The Batas have been asked many times what they are doing in places like that, and they have an-

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## When I was a teenager, I thought I was going to be the world's greatest architect, but then I married a shoe man"

outlets and manufactured 230 million pairs of shoes. As well, thousands of independent retailers market the Bata product. Typically, the couple logs nearly half a million kilometres annually, travelling to the far-flung outposts of their empire: A story is told by one of their acquaintances that on the island of Montserrat, in the local Bata store, two pictures hang side by side: one is of Tom Bata and the other is of Queen Elizabeth.

Certainly, theirs is a world of the rich and powerful. Conrad Black lives on their street. One close working associate of Sonja Bata's suggested I track down Prince Philip for an insight into her character. When the International Monetary Fund and World Bank meetings took place in Toronto last year, the Batas held a bash at their Georgian-style Park Lane Circle home for the likes of David Rockefeller and Eugene Mendoza of the Mendoza Group—"said to own half of Venezuela," according to Zena Cherry. Cherry recorded the occasion for posterity in her *Globe and Mail* column by gushing shamelessly: "On an upstairs sky-high balcony, I felt I could touch the moon and look out over the whole world." Earlier in the column, she'd confided: "I've been to some strange spots in my life and in most of them Bata is a

he was not looking for a business executive when he married her—"One does not make a serious analysis of things at that time of life, I assure you"—that is, among other perks, exactly what he got. As a director of Bata Ltd. (she has always balked at a more specific administrative title, firmly believing she could manoeuvre more freely within the business without one), Bata divides her time between the design of shoes and stores, and the development of marketing strategies. While those tasks alone might well command a substantial portion of any one individual's energies, their description fills only three lines of a thirty-eight-line tally of accomplishments in *Who's Who in Canada*. In addition to her responsibilities in the family business (Bata is a private company whose income, worldwide, has been estimated to hover at \$2-billion), Bata is a director of the Canadian Commercial Corp., Canada Trustco, Alcan Aluminium Ltd., the Urban Transportation Development Corp. and the Council for Business and the Arts in Canada. She sits on the board of governors of York University and the North York General Hospital and is vice-chairman of Junior Achievement of Canada. To round out the roster, between her World Wildlife Fund obligations, both in Canada

swered many times that *they* have nothing to explain by being there. Regimes come and go with the wind. Civil wars uproot political structures, supplanting them with new ones. What are the Batas to do while all around the bombs are dropping? There are factories. There are people employed. Those organisms live and breathe on. Should Bata factories close down if a military dictatorship takes over? Should they reopen only when democracy returns? Is it morally right to make people destitute again?

Clearly, the Bata Shoe Organization has made a lot of people money. And, in many cases, these are people for whom the term upward mobility means the chance to move out of a mud hut. When Tom Bata, tenth in a line of cobblers, son of a man who believed he was sent by God to shoe mankind, sets off, wife at his side, for such places as Upper Volta and builds massive shrines of industry where before there were merely misery and dust, there can be little doubt that the quality of life improves. Hence the "missionary fervor" tag so often tied to the Bata name. When the CBC crew filming *Shoemaker to the World* arrived on Mauritius, they captured, pricelessly, the essence of the Bata employees' schmaltzy team spirit. There, in the blazing sunshine,

them. Moreover, unlike many multinationals that pay coolie wages to produce a commodity they will then flog for exorbitant prices elsewhere, Bata generally sells its shoes at affordable prices to the people who manufacture them. Wherever their plane touches down, Tom and Sonja Bata are greeted like royalty, and it is not hard to see why.

But kings and queens get deposed, sometimes, if they don't blow with the winds of state. And when the Batas have been asked to sail those winds, by and large they have. In Kenya, when the government passed a law precipitating the enforced sale of all of Bata's retail shops, then provided the Batas with a list of prominent people to whom it wished those stores sold—with one of the best locations going to the late president's wife—sold they were. To do otherwise, to fail to abide by a country's laws, Tom Bata told Patrick Watson on *Shoemaker to the World*, would be foolish and dangerous.

Still, given the volatile soils in which the company is rooted, it has suffered few calamities because of political upheavals. A survival record like that is not logged without handshakes in high places. Union representatives such as Charles Ford, general secretary of the five-million-member International Textile, Garment and Leather Workers' Federation, have long maintained that the Batas operate

of stores, they'll do that too. If government allows it and business allows it, Bata does it."

Reilly's cynical words may emanate, in part, from the bitter aftertaste that still lingers from the violence-marred, ugly strike his union waged against Bata—the first in Canada in the company's history—at the shoe plant at Batawa, Ontario, in 1980. According to Sonja Bata, who angrily dismisses Reilly's claims as "very unfair," there are no "blacks" in the Bata organization although there are many Kenyan, Zimbabwean and Nigerian executives. Moreover, she argues, Bata is frequently requested by African nations to establish in their countries because the company trains locals and often sends them abroad to gather expertise. Bata policy is to follow local customs and local laws scrupulously, and if, as in South Africa, local laws also happen to be racist laws—laws that require blacks to use separate toilet facilities, for example—she acknowledges that the Bata Shoe Organization clings to no notions of itself as a ground-breaker in civil disobedience. "You have to be a good corporate citizen," says Bata. "The law of the country is supreme." As for recurrent accusations that Bata crawls into bed with sleazy governments, she dismisses that issue as a red herring: "Our industry, unlike many others, needs minimal government help—perhaps to import some machinery, but that's about all. My husband always makes it a point to see the head of every country we visit, but that's purely as a courtesy. We've never been asked for money at that level; usually it's far below in the ministry where somebody tries you out. And if we were to discover that a company manager was paying off a government official, he would be instantly fired."

There is one final issue to settle, to Bata the unkindest cut. For when she hears the word multinational used in the same breath as the name of the family business, her eyes narrow and her voice immediately leaps about five octaves to hover at a pitch that shatters glass. The association affronts her because multinationals take the rap these days for a host of dastardly practices, not the least of which are interference with local politics, extraction of huge dividends from poverty-stricken populations, exclusion of locals from top management and exploitation of cheap labor. To vilify the Bata name thusly is, in her view, ridiculous: "Look, when we went into the Sudan the people there were real primitives. Women wore veils at the sewing machines and no one dared speak to us. Later, when we returned on business, there began to be a dialogue, and the next visit we were bombarded with questions. In Kenya, they came out of their mud huts to work. Now workers tell us that their sons are studying at the university. Most international businesses are not short-term propositions. You don't go in to make a killing, suck everything out and close down. Frequently people think profitability is the only measuring stick, but

**B**elieve me," says Bata, "there are more comfortable and much faster ways of making money than in the shoe business"

grinning broadly, looking for all the world like a bunch of overgrown campers singing their country on to victory at the Camp Olympiad, stood factory manager Eddie Bathfield and the choir of Bata Mauritius, belting out, with feeling, the Bata Family Song:

"It's a world of laughter and a world of tears  
It's a world of hopes and a world of fears  
There's so much that we share  
That it's time we're aware  
It's a small world after all."

The Bata Family Song, which Bata borrowed from Walt Disney, teaches that in this small world there is "just one moon and one golden sun." The Bata organization teaches that it is the inalienable right of every human being to wear shoes, that to profit means not to pillage, ransack and skip with the loot, but to serve and provide quality as well. The Bata logo has long been synonymous with respectable corporate citizenship, wages that are as good as, if not better than, its competitors', and fierce worker loyalty. The Batas have long made it their business to promote local talent to management even before Third World governments, heady with nationalism, drafted laws making it their business for

as chameleons whose stripes change to fit the political climate they inhabit. In September, 1982, Ford made a whistle-stop in Ottawa on a global tour to drum up support for a worldwide boycott of Bata Ltd. Protesting the activities of a South African subsidiary, Ford claimed Bata was "profiting from apartheid" by allowing the Kwazulu Shoe Co. to suppress union activity, pay substandard wages to blacks, and force them to work unpaid overtime. A Canadian Press story that ran in *The Toronto Star* during Ford's visit reported that an investigation by the Canadian Embassy in Pretoria earlier in the year had corroborated some of the union charges.

Ian Reilly, co-ordinator of the footwear division of the United Food and Commercial Workers' Union, further contends that while "Tom Bata trots all over the world as the great freedom preacher," his multinational company tends to roll with prevailing political tides: "As a multinational, Bata usually responds to the area it's in," says Reilly. "If it's the policy to kick the hell out of blacks, they'll kick the hell out of blacks. If it's the policy to be nice to blacks, they'll be nice to blacks, and if it's the policy to pay government officials and make their wives the heads

it's not. Believe me, there are much more comfortable ways of making money and certainly much faster ways. There are always larger goals. There is a tremendous amount of satisfaction to be gained out of seeing growth in many directions."

It takes almost three months to set up an interview with Bata because I call shortly before she is to leave on several little jaunts to, among other destinations, Nigeria, Togo and the Ivory Coast, and then India, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Australia and Papua, New Guinea. Meanwhile, I start checking around. Immediately it becomes apparent that I should prepare myself to have, not an interview, but a Religious Experience. She is, I am told, "inspirational," and "the kind of woman we'd all like to be." Working with her is "high adventure." Monte Hummel says that when Bata enters a room "everybody's eyes light up." I formulate a mental image of some Swiss Aphrodite racing off in her North Star joggers to save peregrine falcons or pry a few hundred-thousand dollars from the fingers of business or government. Since she sits on several boards, I suspect she may be merely a figurehead on at least a couple, having been asked because somebody needed a token woman or wanted the Bata name on the letterhead. But this hunch turns out to be false. "She reads virtually every piece of material we give her," says Brian Caldwell, vice-president of Urban Transportation Development Corp. Research & Development Ltd. "Unlike many women, Sonja Bata is not awed by a board of men," says John Devlin. Everyone I talk to says she gives thought before each meeting and is good at stimulating debate and discussion. She raises all the questions you want answered, then answers them. *She gets things done.*

Finally, on the telephone, I corner Donella Taylor, who worked with Bata in her Art Gallery of Ontario days in the early '70s. Taylor has just finished an effusive chorus about Bata's "extraordinary mind." I have heard this refrain before. I interrupt and ask whether this woman has a weakness. To Taylor, this seems an impertinent question to ask about Sonja Bata. The question has the effect of thinning the gush of praise to a trickle for a few moments, as she ponders its import. Then, I get my answer: "Gawd, I hope so."

Eventually I stumble across one or two of the disenchanted who have deserted the Bata fold, but they are few and far between. If her disciples march in enthusiastic throngs, the disenchanted gather sparsely. Still, in both circles, she inspires intense feelings. People tend to view her in one of two ways: either she walks on water or she walks on them. "She's a wound spring," said one individual who worked closely with her on a fundraising project, "and you never really know what makes that machine tick. If I want to raise \$10-mil-

lion, give me Sonja Bata, but don't make me part of the team that has to raise it. Oh, she'll make ideas work, all right, but this total obsession with objective tends to swamp others along the way who don't always share her enthusiasm. There are two ways of doing things with her: Sonja's way and the wrong way, and sheer bloody-minded determination like that generally leaves casualties. Sonja Bata is not a great lover of democracy."

Sonja Bata was born Sonja Wettstein, daughter of George and Pati Wettstein, in Zurich, Switzerland, in 1926. She inherited a revered Swiss name, one that any visitor to the country encounters on street signs and postage stamps, for one of Bata's Wettstein ancestors signed the 1648 Treaty of Osnabrück, which officially gave the country its independence. The Wettstein home percolated with activity, much of it intellectual, for its patriarch was a gifted lawyer and a man of renowned international stature. George Wettstein, brother of a Swiss Cabinet minister, had assisted Fernand Labori, counsel on the Dreyfus case; was instrumental in founding the first Swiss Rotary Club, established in Zurich; labored for the Red Cross; and earned a drawerful of international decorations. According to his daughter, he was a visionary who foresaw, long before most, that the world would become politically and economically interdependent. Sonja and an older brother grew up in a Swiss version of a French salon. International celebrities came and went in their grand Zurich home, and it was from listening to them converse that the astute young girl absorbed a rich and textured education in global politics, economics and business. She remembers her father as a difficult man of exacting standards and lofty ideals whose own life was shaped by sweet dreams of the future. To be blinded by the single moment in history, he told his daughter, was foolish and shortsighted.

From her mother, who, in the style of her time, totally sacrificed her own identity to devote herself to her husband, Sonja Wettstein gleaned that a successful man needed a wife who would support him. How she would later choose to interpret the helpmate role in her own marriage evolved largely out of the meshing of a tenacious character with the philosophy imbued at her father's knee.

The Wettsteins and Batas were close friends and had been since 1929 when Tomáš Bata, Tom's father, visited Zurich with his family to consult the lawyer about establishing a Swiss trust for his shoe company. At that time, the Bata organization was based in Zlin, Czechoslovakia, a company town surrounding a factory that was a paragon of Henry Ford-style industrialization. Numerous other plants were scattered across the globe. Tom, twelve years older than his future wife, first met her when she was only a child. In 1932, Tomáš Bata was killed in a plane crash. Only 17 and still a mere appren-

tice in a Swiss factory, Tom was far too young to assume power. Consequently, control passed into the hands of Tomáš Bata's half-brother Jan, with the understanding that one day the son would carry on. In 1939, however, according to Sonja Bata, Jan and Tom had "a difference of opinion" that erupted because "suddenly Jan began mentioning that he owned the business." (The difference of opinion escalated into a bitter feud that was not resolved in the courts until 1962, in Tom's favor.) That same year, 1939, Tom fled Zlin "practically without a suitcase" the week before the Germans marched in, and made his way to eastern Ontario, where, with money from the firm's Swiss accounts, he bought 1,500 acres, built a company town modelled on Zlin and called it Batawa.

Bata mythology holds that Tom chose Canada because, as a boy, he had always been captivated by the romantic Jack London stories of the Canadian North. But romantics, as a rule, do not wind up overseeing multimillion-dollar enterprises. Well before the Nazis invaded Czechoslovakia, Tom Bata had sealed arrangements with the Canadian government to transfer his shoe business to its soil, and machinery and cases of materials had been smuggled out.

In January, 1945, by now actively in charge, Tom made his way to Switzerland to confer with George Wettstein. The war had splintered the Bata organization; Wettstein knew intimately the intricacies of the company's financial and legal structure. He was dying of cancer, however, and Bata arrived one week too late. Once in Zurich, though, he took new notice of the lawyer's strikingly attractive daughter, now a young architecture student. The following spring, 1946, returning to Switzerland on Bata business, Tom escaped for the weekend, at Mrs. Wettstein's invitation, to the slopes of St. Moritz, where the family owned a ski chalet. It was there that the thunderbolt hit. Sonja came bursting through the door after a day spent taming the mountain and apparently schussed right into his heart. "In came this girl full of beans and energy," he recalls with delight. "She came in like a cyclone and that was it."

While Sonja was eager to complete the final year of her architecture degree, her suitor had a company to rebuild and was itching to get going. The Germans had taken command of the Zlin factory without interfering with the ownership. As the Iron Curtain began to descend, however, the Communists nationalized all private enterprises. Everything still left in Czechoslovakia was seized. London's East Tilbury factory had been bombed; in Alsace-Lorraine, the factory near Strasbourg stood on a battleground where the French and Germans had come and gone, plundering as they retreated. There, not a single machine remained. Meanwhile, Zlin-trained people around the world doggedly carried

on. Unable to continue importing Bata shoes from a war-ravaged Europe, they began, largely on their own initiative, to manufacture the product themselves. The Nazis had effectively decapitated the Bata organization; it remained Tom's task to reconstruct. Realizing that 1946 was a crucial year to the future of the business, Sonja agreed to forgo her degree and marry right away.

Fittingly, for two people who would spend a good deal of their married lives airborne, the couple became engaged in a plane. Tom had flown a two-seater to Zurich, but inclement weather forced a landing in Basel. The next day they retrieved the aircraft together and, while piloting the plane home, the young shoe man proposed. As Sonja remembers events, his romantic words of love went, "Either you marry me or I throw you out." Tom Bata could always strike a good deal.

Determined not to pine away, the ever-patient wife at some lonely window, Sonja married Tom in October of 1946, then took off with him for Morocco. The early years of their marriage were punctuated by a dramatic flurry of plane-hopping as they struggled to nurse the company back to health. War-razed European plants were rebuilt and the business was restructured into a cluster of relatively autonomous enterprises breathed to life and continually restored by the authority and expertise of the Canadian office. The Nazis had taught Tom Bata a hard lesson on the dangers of overcentralization. Still, for

all the carefully preserved local independence, there could be no mistake about who was running the show.

Through all this adventure, the Batas were producing children—first, in 1948, Tom, now his father's assistant in Toronto; then Christine, who runs a growing import-export business outside of Boston with her husband, and mothers two children; Monica, also a mother, who freelances in public relations and models in Paris; and Rosemarie, a Bata brand manager. Meanwhile, Sonja Bata's business role evolved. Beginning by designing stores, she soon took on, at her husband's request, a broader administrative function, becoming the king's ears, troubleshooting in various departments, scouting for problems, then reporting back to him. Her fast-developing expertise propelled her next into a store-standardization project, from which she moved into factory and office design. Eventually, marketing and advertising strategies and even shoe design fell into her bailiwick too. Today, the broad sweep rather than the minutiae concerns Bata. A recent Far Eastern trip, however, brings back her meticulous eye for detail. She came home clutching a fifty-point hit list crammed with suggestions running the gamut from ways to perfect the perforation process for thong holes to strategies for improving the faulty chemical compound out of which injected or molded soles are produced in Bangladesh.

The subtle nuances of good chemistry

rarely escape Bata's notice. She has a marriage that crackles because of them. The Batas play tennis together, and chess. One gets the sense that a workout on the courts would be small potatoes compared to the delicate conversational volleying they relish. Watching Tom and Sonja Bata in a room together is like watching bumper cars at a midway. Two colorful kinetic vehicles colliding gently, spinning off in opposite directions, then colliding again. I have heard it said that Tom takes great delight in role-playing the hen-pecked husband, dragged against his will to yet another one of *Sonja's* functions, forced to stand around clutching the Ladies' Program inevitably issued to the spouses. But Sonja wonders if there might not be another interpretation of history. "Let us get this one point straight," she says, pointing an accusatory finger at him. She is smiling as she does this, her eyes registering pure mischief, and she is moving in on him. "If there are fifty functions a year, *five* of them are mine." Now it is his turn and he's not about to miss it. "Sonja has never been shy about expressing her views, and there is hardly a subject she doesn't have a view on." This remark prompts a glance from Sonja that, if subtitled, would read: "I'm waiting, sweetheart, you haven't quite finished the sentence yet." But she is still smiling. They both smile when they lapse into this mode. "Or that she can't make a contribution on," he hastens to add. "Well, I'm certainly glad you remembered to

add *that* part," she quips. A Pepsodent smile flashes. Deuce.

"I guess we always grew up with the idea that mother was beautiful. There's this portrait of her in the living room. We were always conscious of that." Rosemarie, 23, the youngest of the Bata clan, the "frank" one, according to her mother, is talking. Her mother is right. Rosemarie's candor is completely disarming; still, there is no mistaking her affection. She is remembering the birthday parties that were always the best on the block because they were so "terribly well organized"—the ones with all the volleyball games and prizes and contests—and she is remembering the time she got a thumbnail up her backbone when she wasn't sitting up straight at the table, because her mother could be a "real stickler" too. There are other peculiarities of life when one grows up a child of Sonja Bata. "You never needed an *Encyclopaedia Britannica* around with her as your mother."

Family holidays were, to say the least, unusual. Apparently, relaxation is one word Bata has exorcised from the vocabularies of the five languages she speaks. "After a vacation with my mother you always felt as if you needed a vacation," says Rosemarie. "She's the world's best tour guide and she has a phenomenal knowledge of art history. I remember when I was about 10 we did this trip to Peru at Easter festival. We were going to Machu Picchu up in the Andes. You take a bus up to the town and then ninety per cent of the people take a bus down. Not us. We had to do the 2½-hour walk down the mountain. I remember we all picked our way painfully in our sandals and ponchos in the heat. Another day we had to get up at 6 o'clock and go to mass with some Peruvian monks in Cuzco who had rented us some space for a store next to their beautiful monastery that had an arched facade and looked out onto a square. We ate breakfast with them. They ate this unleavened bread and this hot chocolate with a skin about two inches thick and cheese with hair coming out of it. I mean, this was a business thing—they were signing the deal with the monks—but we had to see how they lived."

Seeing how. It is a reiterated theme in Sonja Bata's business, life and mothering styles. What Rosemarie would most like to emulate is her mother's "fantastic clarity of vision." "She can boil a problem down from something terribly complicated into something much simpler. She can pierce through things. She's got a mind like a Swiss watch." But what is it like to *live* with somebody like that? "Well, yes, sometimes the model is pretty hard to live up to, and each kid has gone through it in a different way. She's not your conventional mother, that's for sure."

We are cruising west along the QEW because

Bata has promised to give a slide presentation about a project near and dear to her heart—the Bata Shoe Museum—at a luncheon of the Women's Canadian Club of Hamilton. Fred, the Filipino chauffeur, is driving. Bata has invited him along today because she needs the hour to prepare her notes. Fred sports a jaunty chauffeur's cap, but if chauffeurs get their chauffeur jollies impressing their colleagues with the classy wheels they get to handle on the road, Fred must feel cheated. Sonja has borrowed Tom's car today; he drives a bronze 1980 Delta 88 Olds. It could use a new pair of shocks.

At the Hamilton Convention Centre a rather boxy-looking, sullen-faced welcomer greets us; Welcome Committee is a little nervous, because her task for the day is to write up Bata's curriculum vitae, but Bata is not exactly co-operating at the moment, being more intent on setting down her slide trays and eyeballing the facilities. That accomplished, she sits down for a moment to scour her notes. The convention hall is a sterile, cavernous room in the stolid Canadian tradition, appointed with indestructible carpeting—Astroturf in orange—and matching serviceable chairs.

The lobby, later. Welcome Committee has managed to corner her quarry. This is no mean feat as Sonja Bata can cross a room with a leggy stride that would leave most of the Queen's Own Regiment behind. In her lilting, accented Swiss cadences she rattles off a few pertinent particulars ("I have two honorary degrees that I didn't deserve"), assures her inquisitor she couldn't care less if they mention her age (56), then heads for the escalator. She has five minutes to kill. A reporter from the local radio station has yet to materialize, so she seizes the chance to set off on a dizzying tour of the convention centre, scrutinizing the building's design, checking locked doors and poking her head into dead spaces. Trailing behind, the museum cataloguer Cathie Casse and I begin to feel like Chester, forced to take two steps for every one of Marshal Dillon's. Casse is accustomed to these little side trips: "She'll store the information she's picking up and two years from now in a store design meeting she'll tell somebody to call up the Hamilton Convention Centre and find out what kind of flooring they used."

The elusive radio reporter materializes. He scoops the guest of honor off into a corner and waves a microphone in her face. Later, driving home, his name arises amid chatter of acquisitions for the museum. Impatience flickers momentarily in Bata's voice, and she shakes her head in disapproval. "That reporter," she says. "When I told him we had Terry Fox's shoe in the museum that's when he got all interested. 'Terry Fox's shoe? Really? You have Terry Fox's shoe?' That's all he seemed to care about. As if Terry Fox's shoe is all that our shoe museum is about."

The Bata Shoe Museum is about many

things, but mostly it is about what can happen when Bata applies her volcanic energy to a pet project. Though she knew virtually nothing about the history and design of shoes when she married, her intuitive aesthetic sense, passion for exquisite artifacts and commitment to preserve them spawned a Bata Undertaking. Whenever she touched down in a shoe colony, she brought home some souvenirs. Very soon, she owned a lot of footwear. Just over three years ago, the Bata family created the foundation that houses those treasures, and others acquired through trades and auctions, temporarily kept in dimly lit, humidity-controlled quarters on the second floor of the Bata International Centre in Don Mills. The museum will move to smarter surroundings at Harbourfront in 1985. In the inimitable Bata style of going flat out, she has created a world-class museum that boasts more than 4,000 artifacts and contains not only one of the most important North American Indian footwear collections in the world, but also the largest collection of snowshoes. It is this continent's first shoe museum, supports a staff of three and trades with major European museums. Bata assembled some of the steel shelving for it herself.

Now, when she removes an artifact from those shelves, turns it over in a gloved hand and lapses into a learned discourse on its history and design, this overgrown shoe-stocked closet becomes her shrine. Visitors are brought here, like unconverted heathens, to

pay homage to the patron saint of cobblers. After rhapsodizing about an Australian aborigine executioner's shoe, constructed of human hair and emu feathers so that it can leave no identifiable footprints in the village, she moves on. "And here we have Mr. Ken Thomson's shoe, with a hole in it." She spotted this particular find in a *Globe and Mail* photograph of Thomson that ran during the Kent Commission inquiry. Savoring the irony of Lord Thomson of Fleet with a pauper's sole, Bata requested the historic piece of footwear for her museum. But yet another irony awaited. Bata underestimated Thomson's practicality. Thomson wrote back that, while one shoe was unquestionably beginning to deteriorate, the other was in tiptop condition. She would have to wait for the pair.

Your name would pretty well have to be Lord Thomson of Fleet to get Sonja Bata to wait. Waiting is not her style. Nor does she have much patience with those who do. Self-pitying university students who whine that they can't find work infuriate her; she believes fervently in vigorous individual entrepreneurship—fighting the good fight for what's worth achieving. She detests "well-intentioned nonthinkers," tokenism—"In my own life I forget that I'm a woman"—and extensive government intervention in business. She cares passionately about innovative design wherever she encounters it, saving endangered species and stopping the wanton consumption of resources. She wants very

much to leave behind something of lasting value for her chosen country. She has no time for dilettantes—"You have a certain responsibility to help; in fact, you jolly well *ought* to." Monte Hummel has watched her roll up her sleeves and carry on, even when everybody else is "flat on their back, unconscious." Indeed, though her devotees speak of her in terms usually reserved for the Second Coming, Bata turns out to be—these are C.B. Marsh's words—"not larger than life, but full of life."

Finally, there is the question of her staggering energy. She's not exactly a senior citizen, but she's no kid any more either. "Look," she tells me, voice shrill with exasperation, "if an artist paints, he doesn't put down his brush because it's 5 o'clock. He's inspired. He keeps going. Sometimes things flow. There's a certain restlessness to get where you want to and to know that it's all going to work. Prominent people live longer because they do so much. Just look at the *Time* obituaries if you don't believe me."

As it turns out, I do believe her. If making a contribution is indeed the secret of longevity, then Bata could bottle and sell whatever it is she's running on and make a fortune. If sheer commitment is the elixir that keeps someone out there pounding the track long after others have fallen by the wayside, then Sonja Bata can't miss. I guess I'd have to say, looking at the odds on her outdistancing the rest of us in this life, that she's a pretty safe bet. ■■■