

Remembering Marie Bata

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Devoted wife of Tomas Bata, founder and driving force behind the world's biggest shoemaker, Marie Bata was faced with a terrifying dilemma in 1939 - return to her native Czechoslovakia and face the full fury of the occupying Nazis or watch the Bata company and its workers be decimated by the Third Reich. She chose to return...

It is certain that Tomas Bata was a towering business figure. An eighth- generation shoemaker, he formed the T&A Bata shoe company with his brother Antonin and sister Anna. But from the outset Tomas had grander plans than being a village cobbler. The business that started in 1894 with 10 employees had by 1938 grown enormously, with 65,000 staff in more than 30 countries across the globe. Tomas' vision to "shoe the world" had become a reality.

The Bata family were astute enough to recognise the dangers posed by the Nazis and had already begun to send workers to other Bata offices and factories across the world, thereby ensuring they escaped the terror that was to unfold.

The Bata family had also left the country, fleeing to Canada, but by late 1939 it became clear that somebody needed to return to occupied Czechoslovakia to protect the business and its workers from the worst excesses of the Nazis.

Marie Bata returned to Zlin in January 1940, staying there throughout the war, helping the company's executives to prevent Bata being under complete control of the Nazis. She also helped the families of the company's employees, and the families of prominent Czech politicians.

Accounts of her actions throughout the war highlight that whenever somebody needed help, she would always find a way. Whilst secretive, her courage throughout WWII was recognised immediately after the war when she was decorated by the Czechoslovakia Resistance Movement.









After the war, and having left Czechoslovakia again following the Communist invasion, she began touring the world with her son, Thomas, helping him rebuild the company his father had founded. Again, biographers note how Marie always wanted to help people who needed it, no matter where she was in the world.

This humanitarian work was recognised when Pope Pius XII personally bestowed upon her the award of 'Pro Ecclesia et Pontifice' in 1953.

One year later, in 1954, Marie died aged 61. Ladislav Feierabend, who had been finance minister in the exiled Czech government, spoke at her funeral: "With her we are burying a great and noble part of our country's history."

Tomas Bata was indeed a towering business figure but, without doubt, his beloved Marie ensured that the name Bata is still on high streets across the globe today.

Images: The Thomas Bata Foundation

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