

Me, Bata Shoe Company and Ceylon.

A child's eye view of a "Foreign Posting"

By Tony Warren - A "Bata Son"

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Bata



When I was invited to write a memoir for Bata's Memories, I wondered why, when I had never worked for the company and there was nothing I could say. However, when I started to think about it, I realised that Bata Shoe Company had not only been an intrinsic part of my childhood but had also provided an amazing childhood experience in a foreign land – ie., everything below. So yes, I have got Bata memoirs, but they're a child's version because that's how I remember it all. And remember it I certainly do!

To help me along the way, I have turned out my Dad's black and white photographic memories of our life there - if he had still been with us, I could have asked him all about it. Sadly, he was a very private man and so I've just got to work it out myself. He was an enthusiastic snapper and was proud of his Leica camera (Bought for a few packets of ciggies from a German soldier in the war)

It all started long before 1946 when I was born. My Dad, Sidney Albert Mowbray Warren (RIP) known as "Sam", 1918 - 2001, achieved something called "Matriculation" at school in Bromley by Bow, London (he was good at sums). As a result he joined Bata Shoe Company at East Tilbury in Essex. I don't know when this was but I am guessing it must have been when he was eighteen in 1936.

Mum (RIP) and Dad were married before the war and Bata's bought them a Beautiful Czechoslovakian cut glass decanter and whisky glass set as a wedding present. It is still in pristine condition, sitting in our cabinet, and occasionally used for really good whiskies.

He was "something" in accounts" I think, but I know very little about exactly what. He was big on detail, and I'm glad I inherited that trait! He hadn't been



there long when the war arrived. He joined up, went to officer training school (OCTU), and spent many interesting years in North Africa and Italy, serving in the pioneer Corps, ending up as a Lieutenant and then after the war promoted to Captain and became a Commanding Officer.

Somewhere along the line he managed to sire my brother Michael, who was born in 1943.

Interestingly, he compiled a scrap book of every bit of paper he came across during his war and it makes fascinating reading. To my surprise, I have just found that he did exactly the same for his three years in Ceylon with Bata's - and that makes fascinating reading too.

Having survived the war, he came back to Britain and rejoined Bata's, basically, where he left off as an accountant, I believe.

I was born three years after my brother.

Our family was living in Grays, Essex, surviving the hard times following the end of the war, and Dad managed to buy an old black Austin 7 for £100, to drive to work at Bata Shoe Factory in East Tilbury, each day. I bet somebody from the past will remember that sitting in the car park!

He must have done something right at Bata's (or upset someone important!) because, in the autumn of 1954, his bosses told him he



was moving to the paradise island of Ceylon with his family to become (I think) senior accountant at the Bata Shoe Company of Ratmalana, Mount Lavinia.



We had to go up to London to get our injections for typhoid, plague, tetanus, smallpox, black fever, white fever, blue fever and whatever else they could use as an excuse to make holes in the arms of poor little kids! My God, but that made us all ache – my garden hose is thinner than the needles they used in those days!

To give an overview of what he was letting us in for, there were several problems in Ceylon at the time. The island had a very high violent crime rate, very poor infrastructure, diabolical sanitary systems, one set of traffic lights, the Tamils were restless, left wing

organisations were stirring up workers to strike, and communists were trying to get a foothold, especially on the east coast, where the Russians fancied Trincomalee. Apart from that, it was paradise.

I was eight and a half years old and they told me we would have "servants" in Ceylon. I can remember thinking that, since I had always been refused a pen-knife by my parents, when I got to Ceylon, I only had to tell the servant to go and buy me one and that would be that. I was looking forward to it. My rude awakening was then inevitable.

My memory is confined to the train journey to Southampton, where, at the beginning of January 1955, we embarked on the MV Oranje (a Dutch steamer that had been a hospital ship in the war) for the 7000 mile, three week journey to Colombo, the capital of what today is called Sri Lanka. They had given me sedatives (drugged me!) because I was a bit, er, "hyper".....

This was such an exciting adventure for an eight year old until we got to the Bay Of Biscay when my sea



legs disappeared and I was as ill as a child could be. One night I was thrown out of my top bunk by the motion of the ship. Aspirin was the order of the day,



together with the very comprehensive "British" advice "don't make a fuss". That sorted it. What concussion?

Naturally, food was not the highest item on my priority list as the Atlantic seemed determined to empty me of any fluids whatsoever. My parents said that I should eat and that, if I didn't, I would vanish when we got to the hot bits in the Red sea. Being logical and intelligent, I then didn't see the point in eating when I was going to vanish anyway. So I didn't. Until I arrived in the Red Sea and found that I hadn't vanished. Then I caught up. After all, I was going to get a pen knife.

I remember going ashore at a place called Aden, which is in South Yemen. I have a vague memory of being in a crowded street market and some back streets. I remember it didn't smell very nice and Mum was frightened.



Surviving that, I do remember crossing the equator and watching grown men dressed strangely, covered in shaving cream and jumping into the swimming pool with their clothes on.

Apparently the equator has this effect on people. A tradition called "Line Crossing" dreamed up by the Dutch when they weren't making cheese, tulips and dykes.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Line-crossing_ceremony

What now puzzles me is that the equator is 100 miles south of Ceylon so I have no idea why we crossed it!



Three weeks after leaving Britain, on the 21st January 1955, the Captain managed to find the Pearl of the Indian Ocean and we entered the waters of Colombo harbour. "Entered" and "waters" might be an overstatement as the thick oily brown liquid between the Indian Ocean and the harbour walls only reluctantly managed to slide apart - just enough to let us in. Terry Pratchett would have likened it to Ankh-Morpork. In my eight years of life to that date, being a typical 'orrible little boy, I had encountered many smells and odours, good and bad, some of them in Aden, but nothing on earth prepared me for Colombo harbour. It's funny what kids remember!

Serendipity – we'd arrived!

Bata had arranged for us to pitch up at a colonial hotel ten miles south of Colombo, called the Mount Lavinia hotel, Ratmalana – still there, and apparently very nice it is too.



Bata's also kindly arranged for a bowl of fruit on our arrival and I can remember seeing bananas for the very first time. I ate several of them quite quickly. Shortly afterwards I saw them once again.



I used to run
down to the
beach here

I learned about
jelly fish here

I learned about
gravity, rocks and
water here

After a few weeks, we moved to our bungalow at number 7 Airport Road, beside both the runway of Colombo Airport (shown right) and the entrance to Bata Shoe Company. I never understood, until many years later, why anyone would build a shoe company in a country where nobody wore shoes. (I did say this was a child's view!) I guess this was all part of Thomas Bata's vision to shoe the world.



They couldn't find a suitable school at first, so I had to attend Mount Lavinia High School for Girls. I felt a little out of place.

<http://google-webhosting.com/ghsmount/index.html>

I was the only boy there and so it was something of a relief to be shipped off eventually to Trinity College Kandy. Short-lived relief I should say. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trinity_College,_Kandy

I found this photo of the factory on Google but I have to say, I don't remember it quite as big as that. Maybe it got rebuilt.



Many amazing sights passed our entrance - elephants, iguanas and Bata factor workers. Also, the Duke of Edinburgh (for whom we had to wave flags), the Chinese Prime Minister Chou En-lai and the Cambodian president Norodom Sihanouk.



In about 1956, there was a strike at the factory for several weeks, when the workers camped outside our front gate with the standard "fire in an oil drum" that all strikers seem to use (Even to this day). I didn't understand that either, because the nights sometimes cooled to 80 degrees Fahrenheit. Still, a strike's a strike and that means an oil drum fire. It's called "standards".

I do recall that Dad was less than complimentary about the work ethics of the Sinhalese workers and a "personal views on the Bata strikers" document in his scrap book reflects his opinions that these days would not exactly fit modern day diversity and equality principles. I think I might have understated that a tad. In his defence, his newspaper cuttings proved that the Sinhalese thought the same about themselves - they just probably didn't need an ex-colonist telling them!

Our leisure time used to be at the Colombo Swimming Club, predominantly for whites, in fact, only for whites and then only those that like a gin and tonic. I would splash around in the kiddie pool and that's when I met a man who was a director of Bata's at the time and a great friend of my parents. I think his name was Dick or Jan and I think he was Dutch, with a surname that started with "de". I have a lot to thank him for. After watching me thrash around competently in the kiddie pool, he decided the best way for me to learn to swim was to be thrown far out into the main pool deep end and find my way to land if I could. That's when I first became aware of Bata's corporate ruthlessness, applying the old adage "sink or swim". However, by a happy mixture of flotation and fear, I did make landfall and became a competitive swimmer thereafter, so thank you Dick or Jan.



We did have servants and this is when I learned about "delegation". Before leaving for Ceylon, I got it into my head that they would simply do whatever I wanted them to do. After all, we ignored their

true Sinhalese family names and called them Simon and John, irrespective of what their parents had named them.



My rude awakening finally arrived because when my parents went out, Simon was “delegated” to slipper me if I got out of line – a task he took to with a missionary zeal and I found it harder to outrun him than my Dad, who at least used to give me a head start! So much for the flipping pen-knife. Having said that, he ended up as a second father to me and I remember him with great affection – he typified the wonderfully gentle (slipper excepted) nature of the Sinhalese people – I shall never forget him.

We would holiday in the hot season up in the mountains at Nuwara Elyia by the lake, and we explored Ceylon, going to places like Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa and of course Trincomalee which at that time was a British Navy base, long before the Tamil Tigers partitioned that part of the island at the end of the twentieth century.



We also followed the Victoria River to Kandy (shown), the ancient capital of Ceylon. My parents liked Kandy so much they sent my brother and I to boarding school there, where I had a lesson in how to catch dysentery, spent several days in a fever and clearly



remember being taken to hospital there by rickshaw in the dead of night – like a manual ambulance.

Recovering from this desperately serious illness, the only pathogen known to man we didn't get injected for in London, our parents took us out of the school and we arrived back at Ratmalana where my parents put me into St Thomas' College, Mount Lavinia, while my brother went back to England having, quite frankly, had enough.

I became a member of the school cadet corps and had weekly lessons on the firing range shooting a large rifle. Ah, such is childhood. This is where I was taught to write English by a Mr Pereira, a man with an interesting but sparse command of the English language, which goes part of the way to explaining why I always have to type things. Nevertheless, it was an education and I found that Ferdinand de Lesseps built the Suez Canal, Zambia produces copper ore, 303 Enfield rifles kick like hell and that jute comes from coconut.

Other things I remember during our life there -



- The servants rushing out to tell Dad there was a cobra in a shoe box. Dad got out his Italian double barrellled twelve-bore shotgun (Bought for a few packets of ciggies from a German soldier in the war) and converted the snake into several

snakes.

- Standing outside the Bata Shoe Factory and watching a wall of water (the monsoon) coming across the airfield towards us, preceded by zillions of terrified and temporarily dry insects of all shapes and sizes, most of whom saw our bungalow as a shelter.
- Dad would bring home long strips of rubber from the factory with which he made me catapults so that I could terrorise the local wild life and the people that wouldn't buy me a pen-knife.
- I remember going with Mum and Dad to Cargills in Colombo (A big store) where Mum was bought a Necchi Supernova Automatica. She then worked tirelessly on it to become a true seamstress and indeed could sew just about anything!
- Winning prizes for swimming and diving at the Colombo Swimming Club (Thanks Dick or Jan). My particular bent was diving, and the top board was so high there was sometimes



snow on it. When you hit the water from that, you needed to be very pointed indeed!

- Having my first ever Chinese meal at a restaurant in the Galle Road, swiftly followed by my first ever bout of food poisoning. Two new experiences in one go!

- Being de-loused by the servants who used heated Roses Lime Cordial to do the job - at that time, the most painful thing that I had endured in my short life. However, they didn't make a fuss about those things like we do here, on account of the other supremely dangerous creatures that could also live on, in or under you.



- Having to go to the pictures or swimming club for the evening when the government guys came and fumigated the house. Then, on our return, finding the bodies of all the little friends we had been living with!



- Hiding silently at the top of the stairs when my parents thought I was in bed, while they listened to a radio program called "Journey into Space" on the BBC World Service, which frightened the living daylights out of me – especially the episode with the dangerous little red spiders.

- Being driven all round Ceylon by my ardent tourist parents in their Austin A40. On one very long straight road somewhere in the middle of the country, with monkeys everywhere, seeing an AA Patrolman on a bike-and- sidecar coming towards us – and hearing my parents cheer as he saluted us when he saw our AA badge! (Dad was a member – I have the receipt - £3 a year and they didn't keep ringing you to buy insurance).



- Visiting tea factories – great silver boxes in the green hillside tea-plantations. Very prone to explosions apparently.

- Watching my brother take off in a BOAC Super Constellation from the airport outside our bungalow at the end of 1955 because he couldn't stand the heat and was being shipped back to boarding school in Britain. I was suddenly converted to an only child for the duration.

- Staying at the Welcombe Club, up country in Nuwara Elyia during the hot summers where they used to make me a bowl of ground rice pudding every night while my parents and I played cards – it was "solo", as I recall.



- Singing a song at the annual show for parents at St Thomas College, Mount Lavinia. I think it was "Sixteen Tons" by Merle Travis –unaccompanied nine-year-old English boy singing to five hundred Sinhalese kids. Stage fright was an understatement.

- Going with Mum to the NAAFI at the RAF base at Negombo where we'd stock up on things like Tate and Lyle sugar, Oxo's, Cadburys chocolate and lovely English things. I also remember the constant line of saucepans always on the boil to create our drinking water that was pumped up from the well in our garden.



- Mum had to go into Hospital in Colombo for an operation and she was in the bed next to the bloke that stood in for William Holden in Bridge over the River Kwai and had to jump from the bridge into the water. He had apparently caught germs that hadn't even been invented yet.
- Being chased and slippered by the servants (begrudgingly admitting that it was always well deserved) usually for offences relating to catapults powered by Bata rubber.



- Watching the drain-walla pull out an Iguana from underneath our bungalow, it had been blocking the drains. Drain-wallas were predominantly Tamils rather than

Sinhalese and were given the menial jobs. Nothing was very equal in those days.

- Dad buying Bill Hayley's Rock around the Clock record which he played on our gramophone (brass needle). Incessantly.



- Seeing a deadly thin green "eye-snake" (Vine Snake) in the temple-flower bush by our bungalow. Watching my Dad and his shotgun convert it into three quarters of a snake plus a green stain

on the fence.

- Finding a gigantic poisonous spider on a toilet seat at the very last moment before the point of no return, when visiting San Michelle, a beauty spot not far from Batas. This is when I first used the phrase "I don't want to go now". 
- Seeing British navy ships at Trincomalee and making friends with the chaplains' children when we stayed in the hotel by the harbour.
- Nicking Mum's ciggies and getting very ill when I lit one up, then lighting up another one.
- Going to boarding school at Trinity College Kandy where there was only a very small hole in the seat and no toilet paper - just latrine-walla's with buckets of water they threw at bending kids. Then, sitting in the matron's room with the other boarders each night drinking hot milk, ladled from an enormous cauldron. Can't imagine why I contracted dysentery. 
- On one half term break, Mum drove us to Galle in the south of the island. On the way, she inadvertently ran over some chickens and quickly reviewed the idea of stopping to pay for them when it turned ugly and loads of knife-waving locals gave chase. We later had ice cream at the fort in Galle – fifty years later, thousands of people died on that road in the Boxing Day tsunami. 
- Watching a land-rover, with two blokes in it, drive up one side of the airport runway and then down the other, lighting a series of kerosene lamp flares as they went, because a plane was expected at night. This was "Runway-Lighting" in Ceylon in the fifties. Imagine how lovely it must have been when they electrified it with a single switch.
- Mum screaming when a rat snake thought it a great idea to crawl into our bungalow. More conversion work for Dad and his gun. Rat snakes are harmless (except to rats) but Mum wasn't one to waste the chance of a decent scream.
- Leaving Ceylon with my Mum at the end of 1957 and seeing our servant Simon for the last time.

Towards the end of our stay, I remember Dad had to go to Bombay to the Bata factory there, not sure why. He took his camera and there are quite a few photos of him and colleagues.

Our return flight was epic in itself – once again paid for by Bata's. We flew via fuel-stops at Bombay, Bahrain, Beirut, Frankfurt to

Heathrow. We flew BOAC (Which my Dad said meant "better on a camel") and I was given a gift bag (aka "keep the kids quiet bag") containing a metal model of the Super Constellation four petrol-engine super plane, a pen and writing pad, Chinese checkers and some boiled sweets. Everyone smoked first hand, except the kids who smoked second hand, so it's easy to imagine the smog after all those hours in the air. It was thicker than what waited for us in London!

I think we flew back, rather than returned by ship, because the Suez canal was now blocked with shipwrecks on account of a misunderstanding between America and Britain relating to what the American phrase "*Don't worry, we'll always be there for you*" actually meant. I remember we were very worried about Dad staying behind to finish his posting because Ceylon



was getting decidedly dangerous, especially for whites. The man who taught Mum to drive while she was in Ceylon was leaving the Mount Lavinia hotel in his car one night (by this time, everywhere like that was now guarded by armed soldiers). Apparently he didn't hear them scream "Stop" several times at the tops of their voices, and as his car receded into the distance they fired off a 303 round which did manage to stop him. Permanently.

We landed in Old Blighty. It was nice for the noise to stop. Four great big petrol engines droning away for twenty four hours – that was quite a memorable flight, what with the cigarette smoke and being repeatedly beaten by a Chinese Checkers set.. On the taxi ride from Heathrow through London to Grays, I saw strange young men with large quiffs, very thin ties, large thick-soled shoes and tight trousers hanging around on street corners. My first view of teddy boys.



For some reason I'll never understand, although back in the UK, both my brother and I were again deposited in a boarding school, this time in Norfolk. We later returned to Grays. He went to Grays Technical School and I went to Palmers Boys School – we lived near Nutberry Corner.

Bata Shoe Company at East Tilbury touched my life regularly in the later years when I would invariably go with Mum to drop Dad off at the Factory in the morning and then sometimes go with her to pick

him up in the evening. When I was older and had a car, I did the journey for them.

I remember that in the sixties or early seventies, Dad had to go to Bata Development Limited in London because Bata were going to buy a thing called a "computer" to handle the accounts. He was smitten and it became the big thing in his life – finally he would talk about his work. Some of the photos I have are of those sessions with other managers etc, and a lady working a thing that looked like an ancient workstation without a screen. I bet the average mobile phone's a million times faster these days!

Eventually Dad was given a gold watch for long term service with Bata Shoe Company and finally collected his Bata pension but I cannot remember the date of his retirement.



Well, that's the end of my memoirs. I am left with the question "What did Bata's do for me?". Well, I learned to swim, saw the world, acquired some amazing memories and met some truly wonderful people. On top of that, my Dad was always in work, we had a home, food and clothes.

That's what Bata's did for me.

Thanks Bata's.

Tony Warren.