Old Woman at Play
– An Interview with Chaika Waisman *

photographs by **Dita Shehu**

Vieille femme qui joue

Chaika Waisman crée des poupées et d'autres objets d'artisanat depuis plus de vingt-cinq ans. Elle parle de son travail.

The house is overwhelming and enchanting at the same time. Half way up the staircase, a chorus of dolls welcomes you into the house. In the living room, the walls are covered with button and sequin portraits and framed tapestries. And crowding the dining room, about sixty dolls occupy every window ledge and cabinet top, the entire dining room table and even the door knobs. Made of stockings and fishbones, corn silk and sequins and onion bags and javex bottles, they turn the room into a Bartholomew's fair.

While reading *Old Woman at Play,* Adele Wiseman's searching tribute to her mother's creativity and to the creative process, I experienced the excitement and familiarity of a homecoming. Now, on meeting in person, the dolls, their creator and their celebrant, I am stirred by these same emotions again.

We conduct the interview in the kitchen where one entire wall is covered with the drawings of Chaika Waisman and her granddaughter. At the age of 83, Chaika Waisman is battling cancer, but her energy in describing her work, in taking us on a tour of the rooms that exhibit it, and in drawing us into her world, is humbling.

Have you read Adele's book?

Chaika: I started it and have read about 12 pages, but last night I fell asleep.

In the book, Adele asks herself whether she's describing you and your work as you would see them or just her version of you and your work. Are you the person she's describing?

Chaika: I don't know if I'm the person she's described. As long as she says it, I'll believe it. You believe with the child, just believe. You try to believe.

You give all your dolls a partner. When you start a doll, do you already know what its partner will be like?

Chaika: Never. The only thing is . . . why I give them partners

*See review of *Old Woman at Play* in **Book Review section**

is, I don't like loneliness. I like happiness. And persons, being lonely . . . even a doll, when they're in a pair and you look at them, they seem more happy than they should have been alone. This is my point of view.

What I like about your work and what Adele says about it is the joining process. She talks about, for instance, when you pick out a medicine bottle or fishbones and match them to something else, already you're joining them.

Chaika: That's right.

And then you give them a partner and you're joining them again.

Chaika: Yes.

And then you give the couple to somebody else . . .

Chaika: And make a family. That's good. I like something . . . they bring it into their homes and their hearts, their feelings, just like somebody you get used to and you love. This is my feeling. What I like is happiness. I would still, for my eyes, want to see peace and friendship among us.

You've given so many dolls. Do you feel, when you're making them, that part of the making isn't finished until they're given to somebody?

Chaika: Well, naturally, when they are finished, I give them away. But before, when I'm making them, I think I'll give them to somebody and then they are happy. [The dolls and the people].

Do you make stories about the dolls?

Chaika: No. As I said often to Adele, if I could write, if I could put paper with a pen, things like writers do or poets do . . . I've got so much in my head and my mind. But I can only sometimes remember and tell it to people. But I couldn't write a story about it. Making up stories is a good thing. But if you could put it on paper, it stays with you.

Have you ever come across one of the dolls you made years ago and found it in a new place? Do you know where all the dolls have gone?

Chaika: No, I could not because I don't even know where my children are that I worked with and cried with in the hospital where I worked for four months [during the great polio epidemic in Manitoba in the 1950's]. But two years ago I found one of my children . . . he'd been a patient and now he's a doctor. Somebody told him I was at the hospital and he came to see me.

They don't forget.

Chaika: No, they don't. I would still like to know where some of the children are. Me and Adele used to take great crates of dolls to the Children's Hospital in Winnipeg. Not just ten or fifteen, but in the hundreds.

There are some young children I have played with who have dolls their grannies or their moms have made, and they are so used to perfect store-made dolls, they don't appreciate the hand-made ones. Have you ever seen that happen?

Chaika: . . . I could say it happened in this house. So many dolls I make, and the little one [Adele's daughter, Tamara] copies me, and she does the same thing. But she still wants a doll from the store.

I was talking last night to an artist who prints textiles. She designs flowers, birds, insects in long silk screens. We talked about people who prefer her work to a machine's work. What they like most is the mistakes. In her work, they can see she was there making it – in her mistakes.

Chaika: [She smiles]The mistakes, yes. Handwork is very personal. If I find something . . . [I make it] how I see it. The machine can't do everything.

The other thing about handwork is that it makes you look twice. In something that's all the same, you don't look very closely. But in your things, because they're hand made . . .

Chaika: You see personality.

Yes, and you don't just look closely, you look at every little piece . . .

Chaika: And look again.

And see each piece as important.

Chaika: I like everything in my work. Materials, dolls, original works . . . very personal.

Have you ever been criticized for giving your work away?

Chaika: [She sits taller and mimics in a mocking voice] 'Why don't you sell it? You could make money!' I said 'Money doesn't mean to me anything. This [she points to her sewing bag] means to me . . . if I make somebody happy, fine. Anybody could buy a doll or things at the store.

Tamara does dolls too. And she makes partners for them too. Have you watched her work and your work come together?

Chaika: Sure. We work together sometimes. I sit and work, and she says, 'I'm going to try such and such.' I was working on those buttons and she was watching television and came to me for sequins and golden hair.

Chaika Waisman starts to talk about the Depression years, having to rent out their first house because the taxes were too steep, and moving into a huge store which had to be partitioned for family and business use. They rented their house for $35.00 a month and paid $32.50 a month for the store, which left $2.50 for a month's bread and milk. Her husband had lost his job and the family was entirely dependent on dressmaking and mending for income. She understates how tough those years were. Of the first order that came in she says, "The first five cents came in to put a button on and I cried and said to my husband, 'There, we've got bread.' " She talks of making clothes for the whole family out of leftover fabrics from clients, and of giving parties and dances where everyone had fun but there was little food to share.

Chaika: I used to give Marion sandwiches for university. Sometimes I had a piece of tomato to put between the bread; sometimes not. And I said to her, 'let people think you're eating a sandwich. No one sees inside'. We used to have fun. You see, out of tragedy I made happiness. The same thing with the dolls.

Chaika Waisman is not being nostalgic or sentimental when she punctuates stories of hunger and sickness or the flight from Russia with comments like, 'and we had such fun'. It is clear that fun and happiness and sharing are all mixed together for her. To share food with others, to have neighbours extend them indefinite credit when they had no money, all brought her pleasure and still bring on a special smile.

You've been surrounded by giving and givers — your neighbours, your family — all givers.

Chaika: But I give too. I taught it . . . we were all friends. I never wanted anything for nothing. When we were children and used to come to my father and complain about the way other children treated us, my father used to say, 'My children, don't learn bad things from them, let them learn good from you.' This still stays with me.

Every time you give a doll, it spreads out the act of giving.

Chaika: It's a pleasure. If we share, people learn something: show them the right step . . . how to live with people.

You've never been back to visit Russia. Do you wish you could see where you were born?

Chaika: I would like to see the patch of land I was born on. I can't go back because we left as refugees. Some things I miss.

Five, six, seven years after the Revolution, the times were tough . . . starvation, and such things. Today was a pogrom . . . they killed people, they burned houses, they robbed, they did awful things. Tomorrow we went to the theatre. Yesterday the city was burning. But the theatre was still there in good condition. You went to the theatre or you went to the ballet. We went dancing. We lived for today. Yesterday's gone and tomorrow, nobody knows what will come. The culture is more interesting than here.

Here, how many people go to the theatres? I know in Winnipeg they used to say we were crazy: always the theatre, always the opera. As poor as we were, we had a season ticket to go and see the opera or the symphony. This was still something from Europe. A lot of people said, 'you're so old, why are you still interested?' But we couldn't live without a book, reading, the opera. We could find something out in life. Some people are ignoring things. They used to criticize us but what is *their* life? Only money they knew. Money, money, money.

Adele wrote her book for so many reasons. But partly, she's answering the people who say, 'Why go to the ballet and why go to the opera?' She thought your work would be easier for them to approach, and that if they could come close to your work . . .

Chaika: They might understand something. To my knowledge, the way I feel, the way I understand . . . people, when they have a chance to laugh, they shouldn't cry. They should do things to make them happy and to occupy their minds. The crying doesn't help.

I lay on the hospital bed with radiation treatment and I still do dolls, I still do things. Some people lie there for weeks. I try to make them happy. Some are depressed — I couldn't blame them — they were so depressed they started to cry and say, 'What's the use of making a doll? I can't. I have no patience'. I say, 'Take it, and you'll find out there will be patience'. And I had a bag of sequins and buttons and all kinds of stuffs. And I'd show them, 'Look, I'm in the same position as you but I don't want to cry about it'. And I'd come with my bag to their room and show them what to do. And then they'd come in happy. Before they were crying. Then they come in happy and say, 'See, I thought I couldn't do it. But I made it. Your beads improved it. Your buttons improved it'.

What would you like to have happen to your dolls at this stage. Would you like to continue being surrounded by your dolls? Would you like to see them in a small museum?

Chaika: In a small museum. That's where I'd like to see them. People should come, not to admire them, but to see somebody did something and it's interesting. And feel, 'I could do this too'. Another person could do it.

In fact, I said to Adele, I wish all the people should see it, and sick people should see it and see the world isn't bad. Because you could go on doing things even when a person is like me, in such a position. I'm sick, but today I feel good. I'm alive.