

How blessed I have been to know these two men

The shadows lengthen and I am proud to have known these two great Canadians, George Chuvalo and Ron Joyce

by Conrad Black



Ron Joyce, the founder of the Tim Horton fast food chain, who died last week aged 88, was a good friend, a brilliant businessman, an extremely generous and unpretentious person. His life was a remarkable story of someone from a very modest and even disadvantaged background who made an immense fortune from his own hard work and ingenuity and then divided his time equally between maintaining and building his fortune, enjoying it with the pursuit of all the hobbies and socializing that he enjoyed, and spreading his money around a wide range of good

causes. He did not pretend to be anything he was not, did not wish to be anyone but who he was, achieved what he wanted, but was never in the slightest boastful or self-satisfied for that.

In the same measure that he did not envy anyone else, he did not remind those less successful than he of what he had accomplished. When he was wealthy, he did what he would have liked to do when he was poor. He became a pilot at one stage of his astonishing career, and liked flying, and in his later years, he owned six aircraft and had an entire aircraft maintenance operation for his fleet. He had liked to speculate on stock markets when he could only trade in odd lots. More recently, he had stock market positions of hundreds of millions of dollars, much of it with borrowed money but very over-secured, and bought and sold in large blocks at his office, in front of a large screen reporting ever-fluctuating stock prices and financial information from all over the world. His office was near his airport and was a converted house and seemed more of a home than an office. He wanted comfort and cordiality, treated everyone equally and pleasantly, and had absolutely no interest in impressing anyone.



Ron Joyce boards his jet at Fox Harb'r in Wallace, N.S. Photo courtesy of Fox Harb'r

The first time I met him, my associates and I had just founded the National Post, and I called upon him to suggest that he enable us to sell the newspaper in his Tim Horton outlets. He volunteered a most gracious commendation for our having identified an unoccupied share of the newspaper field and having filled it with a fine product that achieved high immediate acceptance. I thanked him in hopeful terms that my mission might be a success. Selling newspapers in all his points of contact with the public, especially if we were exclusive (which I was pitching for a rich and imaginative variety of reasons) would be a great breakthrough. However, he

moved on, very amiably, to say that his business responded to different criteria than mine, and while I wanted people to linger reading our newspapers to build loyalty and strengthen the sales-pitch to advertisers, he wanted maximum through-put in his outlets and if people sat down to read newspapers he would lose his fast service attraction and Tim Hortons would look like reading rooms.

In commercial terms, the meeting was a fiasco, but there arose as a result of it a warm relationship which, though not frequently rekindled, continued to the end of his life. He was one of the few people I approached at the worst of the financial squeeze I endured some years ago during my legal travails, and he responded (at no ultimate cost or risk). He was not an intimate, he owed me nothing, but he was a generous man. Another friend, a retired politician who did not know him well, asked Ron to support a university he was raising money for and started to elaborate on the merits of the ambitious project of his old alma mater. Ron interrupted him and said: "I don't need to know about that, I think you did a good job for all of us in public life and if you are supporting this, I'm happy to help." A prodigious donation followed. He was a congenial and witty companion. I have never heard a negative word about him, and am one of a very large number of people who deeply regret that we shall not be seeing him again.



George Chuvalo, left, with Conrad Black. Chuvalo never gave up, in the boxing ring or life. Supplied photo

This brings me to another great Canadian octogenarian of a very different career, another old friend whom I encountered after a couple of years since our last meeting, at a neighbour's party last week: George Chuvalo. He is showing some of the attrition of his 81 years, decades of them spent in the utmost physically gruelling life of a prize-fighter. But he is undaunted by the rigours of that occupation and by the scars of family tragedy. He was five-time Canadian heavyweight boxing champion, holding that title for the

astounding total of 17 years. He lost to six world champions, but usually with distinction: Ernie Terrell, Jimmy Ellis, Floyd Patterson, Joe Frazier, Muhammad Ali and George Foreman, and he defeated one-time world heavy weight contender Cleveland "Big Cat" Williams. Ali, having called him "a washerwoman," after going 15 rounds and taking 10 stitches called him "the toughest guy I ever fought." After the bout, Ali made a brief hospital visit while George "went dancing with my wife." His match with Patterson was rated the prize-fight of the year by Ring magazine in 1965. Jack Dempsey managed the event at which he knocked out four opponents in one night and gained the Canadian heavyweight title in 1956, aged 18. Joe Louis was the referee for one of his successful title defences in 1968.

He was not, in world terms, a great prizefighter, but he was then, as he remains, the greatest prize-fighter in Canadian history, and a contender, the third-ranked heavyweight in the world for much of the Sixties. But that is a sport where only the champions really succeed. He was formidable and heroic, and had the same qualities outside the ring and retains them still. George's parents were Herzegovinian immigrants; his mother plucked chickens and his father, though he had lost an arm, was a slaughterhouse worker. George spent much of his life training in the gloomy Lansdowne Gym in western Toronto. His first wife and one of his sons died in suicides, an option that tormented him throughout the 1990s, and two other sons died of drug overdoses, presumed (with no great confidence) to have been accidents.



George Chuvalo, dressed as a washerwoman, crashes Muhammad Ali's press conference before their bout. Postmedia News file photo

George tried his hand at a number of businesses; the Caravan Restaurant didn't work out; a stationery business failed. He did better as a real estate agent. He endured personal insolvency, eviction from his home by the Croatian Credit

Union with his furniture piled up on his lawn. Yet he successfully fought these problems too, pulled his life together and had a successful retirement. He became one of Canada's most effective champions of drug avoidance, and substantially rebuilt his life, and had a prodigious 80th birthday celebration last year. Now he is dealing with a very unpleasant divorce and excessively nasty litigation, accompanied by some of the ravages of age, including trouble concentrating. But I can report that he is serene and in apparently good humour, looks vigorous, and though he may conceal many heartaches, he exudes the same congenial indestructibility as he did when I first saw him at the height of his professional career, more than 50 years ago.

George never gave up. He was never knocked down in a fight; he fought on against world champion Smokin' Joe Frazier even when one of his eyes was dislodged from its socket and the other was almost closed by near-hits. He never threw in the towel, or took the easy way out, of anything. He had integrity and courage, always. He was a champion for a long time, and he still is.

The shadows lengthen, and Ron Joyce and George Chuvalo are men one is proud to have known.

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