

# Jelinek book recalls escape, victory

Otto and Maria Jelinek were skating on very thin ice when they won the World Figure Skating Championship in Czechoslovakia in 1962.

Thirteen years earlier, they, along with their family, had escaped from that country, fleeing the tyranny of the Communist party that sought to impose its will on the land.

History records that the brother and sister team won the world championships and in so doing scored a moral victory for the cause of democracy, according to their youngest brother Henry.

That statement is the underlying theme of a book Henry wrote in 1965 entitled, appropriately enough, "On Thin Ice."

After three printings in the United States, On Thin Ice received its first Canadian sendoff Monday night in Oakville. The setting was also appropriate because Oakville is the adopted home town of the Jelinek clan.

"On Thin Ice", published by PaperJacks Ltd., of Markham, tells the story of the family's suffering under first the Nazi invaders and later the Communist tyrants.

But as well as being a story of suffering and heroism, the book, Henry admits, reflects the experiences of hundreds of thousands of immigrants to Canada from all parts of the world.

Jelinek said he started to write the book when he was 18 years old, first intending it simply as a gift to his family, a chronicle of their struggle to escape their homeland and establish themselves in Canada.

"It just started out as something that I wanted to give the family, but as I wrote and wrote, I realized that it had started to go beyond my own family," he said.

"We had to escape and come here and I realized that as I wrote, I was reflecting the struggle and suffering of hundreds of thousands of immigrant families."

Jelinek said the book took him two years to write. To date, it has sold out of its three hardcover printings in the United States and has also sold close to one million copies in Japan.

Henry admitted that to the public, Otto and Maria are the stars of the adventure, because it was their courage that was shown on the ice of the Prague arena during the skating trials, "but they're not really private stars," he admitted.

"It didn't matter who became the champions, it was a total family objective to achieve that."

"The beauty of it was that we escaped and by going back there and winning, we showed



ON THIN ICE is a book detailing the Jelinek family's escape from Communism in Czechoslovakia and Otto and Maria Jelinek's subsequent winning of the world figure skating championships in that same country. The first

that democracy wasn't the corrupt system that the Communists led their people to believe," he said.

Otto Jelinek, a successful businessman in his own right and a member of Parliament, has carried that love of democracy and hatred of Communism into his political dealings as well.

"We're not really heroes," he said, "we were just given the opportunity, through sport, to bring a little substance of freedom to our former home. The people didn't look at us as athletes, to them we were a little bit of freedom."

After their win in the world competition, Otto and Maria skated professionally for several years and then returned to Oakville.

Beyond simply detailing the horrors of living under the Communist regime, Henry said his book was also designed to show the advantages of the free lifestyle enjoyed in Canada.

The Jelineks arrived in Bronte, settling there in 1949 after the Communist government of Czechoslovakia confiscated the family cork business. Father Henry Sr. set up a new company, Jelinek Cork, which today is operated by his son Henry Jr.

Another son, Frank, started the Jelinek sports equipment firm now located in Oakville. Richard, the third son, heads

Canadian printing of the book was officially launched in Oakville Monday night and Maria and Otto were on hand to sign copies for dignitaries.

a computer company in Chicago. Otto, when he retired from professional skating, worked for Jelinek Sports and later started Canadian Skate Industries, which he sold before getting into politics.

Currently he represents a Toronto area riding but will carry the Conservative banner against Liberal incumbent Frank Philbrook in the next federal election.

"They have greatly contributed to the history, culture and education of this town and we're damn glad they're here," commented former mayor Allan Masson, during the formal part of the book launching held at the Country

Squire Monday night. Even though Henry stated that writing the book was a labor of love, he was forced to admit that writing about relatives was not an easy task.

"You can't write about a family as close as ours and not insult someone. If there's a single big problem with the book, that's it, my efforts to

avoid insulting anyone," he admitted.

Even though the essential message of the book is serious, Henry said there are still nuggets of humor to be found through its pages.

One such gem concerns famed sportswriter Jim Proudfoot, now a close family friend.

When Otto and Maria were just starting out on their rise to world acclaim, Proudfoot began following them as a reporter, but he proved himself a jinx.

Whenever he was watching them perform, one of them would fall.

When Proudfoot wasn't in the audience, the performance would be letter perfect.

That jinx caused some fears at the world championships, because although the newsman had been trying all day not to look at them perform, he finally gave way to temptation and took a peek at them on the ice.

The second he did that, Maria fell in the middle of a tricky aerial manoeuvre.

The fall didn't prevent them from taking top honors, however.

For Maria, the book is a chance not only for others to share part of the full life she has led, but for them to learn something of the danger of Communism.

"I think people who haven't been through Communism must learn a lot from this, be-

cause it has a family going through it — that makes it a lot more interesting."

"It's surprising for them to realize just what some people had to go through."

Maria admitted their skating victory in 1962 was a victory for democracy — even the communist journalists showed the fear of leaders in refusing to write about the Canadian stars who had escaped from the Communist Bloc 13 years before.

"They were afraid and they were told not to write about us because they didn't want to show that someone could escape and still make a success of themselves outside of Communism," she said.

This dislike of Communism and suspicion of socialism is a feeling that has also crept into Otto's political work, he admitted, although he stressed he isn't the witch-hunting fanatic some people believe him to be.

"My views aren't fanatical, they're realistic — I realize the danger of socialism that is creeping into our unions and into other walks of life, but certainly the feeling that I see a Commie under every rock is laughable and ridiculous," he added.

"This book is essentially a family story, but it stretches beyond that because it tells the story of all families."

"On Thin Ice" retails for \$2.25 and is available through most bookstores.

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