

Jean Désy

Diplomat par excellence

Born in Montréal in 1893, Jean Désy studied law at Université Laval in Québec City and the Sorbonne in Paris. From 1919 to 1925 he taught law and history at the Université de Montréal, and Canadian history at the Sorbonne.

When O.D. Skelton became Under-Secretary of State for External Affairs in 1925, one of his first tasks was to fill the Counsellor's position he had just vacated. His replacement would also be the first recruit to Canada's new foreign service. With his passion for quality, Skelton set very high standards for the candidates. Of them all, only Jean Désy qualified.

Désy was first posted to Paris in 1928. Over the next 11 years, he served on or headed Canadian delegations to the League of Nations, Imperial conferences and many international meetings.

In January 1939, he became Canada's first Ambassador to Belgium and the Netherlands. In May 1940, he was in the path of German troops invading Belgium. Amid the dangers of the blitzkrieg, Désy steered his staff and their families to safety. Afterwards he wrote Skelton, "I am greatly relieved to have concluded this adventure without loss, or injury, to any of my personnel. . . . All through this odyssey, I have never failed to keep in mind what you have told me should be the first consideration, namely the safety of the personnel."

Leaving Europe, Désy was appointed Canada's first envoy to Brazil in June 1941. When the post was elevated to an embassy in late 1943, he became Canada's first career diplomat to serve as an ambassador. He stayed for six years in Brazil, making a strong impression. He became famous for his "all-Canada dinners" featuring Canadian cheese, salmon, vegetables, beef, tourtière and, of course, maple syrup.

In September 1947, Désy was named Canada's first Minister (later Ambassador) to Italy. He toured schools, distributed Canadian aid, and visited places where Canadian soldiers had fallen in battle and were buried. Désy promoted reconciliation in a spirit of generosity.

In January 1952, on secondment, he became Director General of the CBC's International Service (later Radio Canada International) in Montréal. The voice of Canada abroad, the Service was then facing criticism for supposedly being "too pinko [sic] on communists." Changing the tone was among the tasks awaiting Désy, described in a contemporary newspaper report as "one of External Affairs' more dexterous hot-potato jugglers." He succeeded, making the Service "frank and critical of the evils of communism to the point of combativeness."

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—Jean Désy



Désy (right) at a meeting with Prime Minister Mackenzie King, External Affairs Minister Louis St. Laurent and officials from the Department, ca. 1946



Désy (centre) and External Affairs officials with Under-Secretary O.D. Skelton (right) en route to London for Imperial conference, 1926

In 1954, Désy was named Canada's Ambassador to France, a prestigious posting where he served until retirement in 1957.

During his tenure, the Canadian Embassy in Paris enjoyed unprecedented influence.

He elevated diplomacy to an art. "Never forget to be a diplomat, not 12 but 24 hours a day," he often said. Starting with the language, he would learn everything about the country where he was posted, while championing Canadian interests.

Married to Corrine Boucher, a father of two, Jean Désy died in Paris in 1960. Like his friend Lester B. Pearson and others of their time, he had set a standard unsurpassed for service to his country. ●

