

## CANADIAN DIPLOMACY'S QUIET ACHIEVER

# Jules Léger

**C**almness, friendliness and an ability to bring overheated temperatures down—in their recollections of Jules Léger, the career diplomat who became Governor General, these are the traits that people mention most often. Useful as such qualities are in diplomacy, by themselves they do not account for success of the kind that Jules Léger achieved in his chosen career. In fact, as the record demonstrates, they were accompanied by an ability to take on and master new and difficult assignments.

Joseph Jules Léger was born in 1913 in Saint-Anicet, Quebec, the younger of two sons of Ernest and Alva Léger. His brother, Paul-Émile, became a cardinal and Roman Catholic Archbishop of Montréal. Their father was a local storekeeper who doubled as postmaster and choir director.

After university studies in Montréal and Paris, Jules Léger joined the staff of the Ottawa daily *Le Droit*, where he became an editorial writer. Even in 1938, the year of Munich and appeasement, Léger's editorials included fierce denunciations of Hitler and the Nazi persecution of Jews.

His writings attracted the attention of a notable Ottawa resident, Prime Minister Mackenzie King, who offered Léger a junior position on his staff. In 1940, after passing the necessary examinations, he joined the Department of External Affairs and was promptly seconded to the Prime Minister's Office, where he served for three years.

Following this assignment, Léger took up the much-travelled life of a career foreign

service officer. In 1943, he helped open Canada's first legation in Chile. After his posting in Santiago, he served both in Ottawa and overseas, including in London. In 1953, at age 40, he was named head of the Canadian Embassy in Mexico City—at that time the youngest Canadian Ambassador ever.

In August 1954, he reached the top rung in his chosen profession when he was appointed Under-Secretary of State for External Affairs, the first Francophone to hold the senior job in the Department. This was an eventful period marked by such dangerous moments as the Suez Canal conflict and the Hungarian uprising.

Léger's role in these crises was to ensure that Secretary of State Lester B. Pearson, representing Canada at the United Nations, got solid Departmental support in the form of information and expert advice. He did so with his usual unflappability. Basil Robinson, a retired diplomat who was then in the Department's Middle Eastern Division, remembers a weekend during the Suez crisis, when an urgent problem came up: "Rather than convening an emergency meeting at the office, he had his secretary call to invite some of us who were involved in the file over to his house to talk. This was typical of the low-key, informal way he operated and he got very good results in that mode."

Domestically, Léger's period as head of the Department covered a major political watershed: the change from the Saint-Laurent to the Diefenbaker governments in 1957. Léger handled the Departmental aspects of the transition with aplomb.

In 1958, he was appointed Canadian Ambassador to NATO. In 1962 he became Ambassador to Italy, and in April 1964 Ambassador to France. He served there until 1968 during the deep chill in Franco-Canadian relations, which reached its lowest temperatures with President de Gaulle's declaration "Vive le Québec libre".

Léger's efforts limited the long-term damage to relations between the two countries. As the writer Jacques Monet later commented, "His tact, patience, splendid judgment and solid, steady nerves did more than keep the lines open between Ottawa and the Quai d'Orsay."

In 1968, Léger entered a new phase of his career with his appointment

Gabrielle Léger dancing with Jules Léger in 1979.

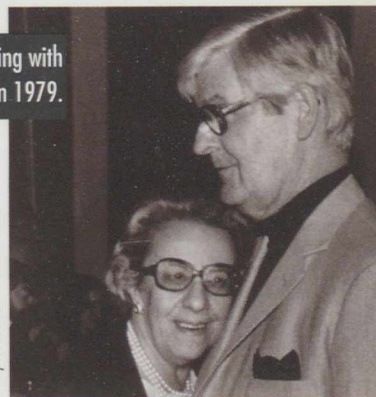


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to the post of Under-Secretary of State under Gérard Pelletier.

In 1974, while Pierre Elliot Trudeau was Prime Minister, Léger was appointed Governor General of Canada. He suffered a stroke less than six months later, which left him partially paralysed and barely able to speak. But he persevered with his duties with grace and determination, ably assisted by his wife Gabrielle. He retired in 1979 and died on November 22, 1980. ●—

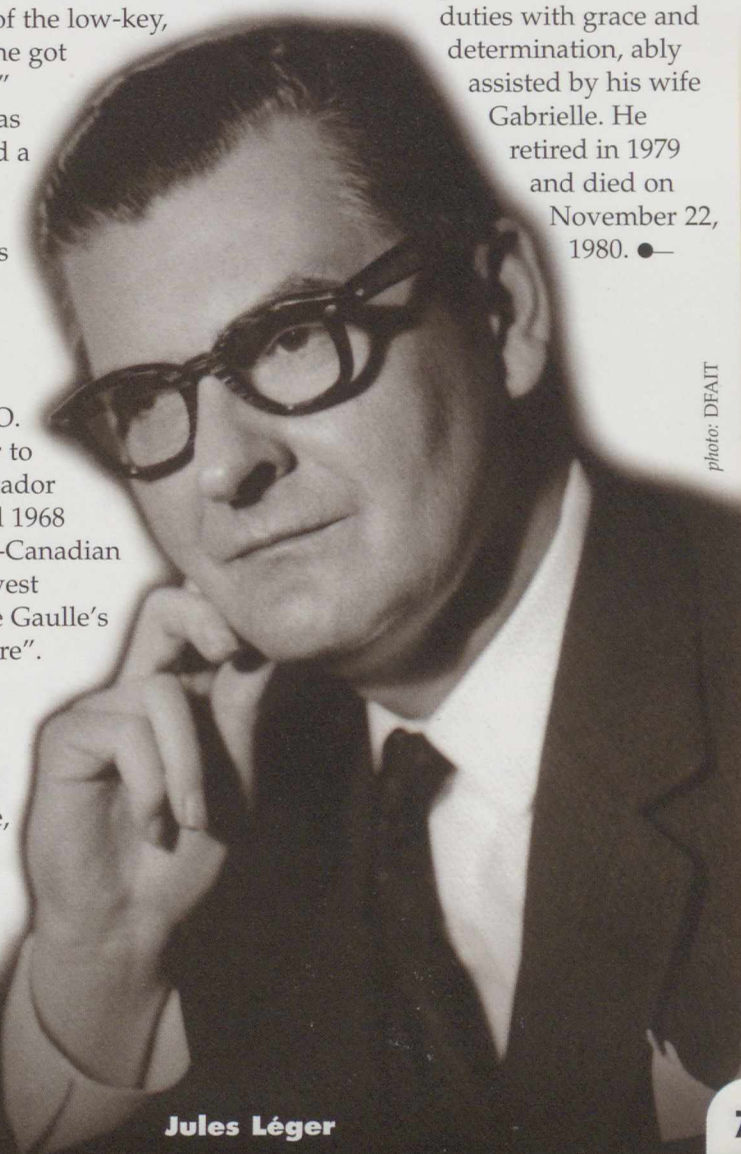


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