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## **Ex-McGill professor was on front lines of history**

*BY MIKE BOONE*

How cool is this for degrees of separation? This week in Verdun, I shook the delicate, 83-year-old hand of a woman whose father shook the murderous hand of Joseph Stalin.

Cultured gentleman that he was, Tadeusz Romer probably washed up on the way out of the Kremlin.

"Stalin was extraordinarily affable," Thérèse Romer said of the encounters. "My father described him as a charming man."

We were chatting in the plant-filled sunroom of Romer's high-rise apartment. She has a lovely view of Therrien Park and the narrow river channel separating mainland Verdun from Nuns' Island - a serene setting for sipping green tea and talking about her late father's remarkable life.

Tadeusz Romer, who died, at 82, in 1978, was a diplomat and educator. His career in diplomacy spanned the Paris peace conference of 1919, which restored Polish independence, to Stalin's creation of a puppet regime in Warsaw, which ended the dream of freedom for expatriate Poles such as Romer.

Romer's postings included Rome, Lisbon, Tokyo and Shanghai. His daughter's photographs show a handsome man decked out in the finery of an era when diplomats wore tunic jackets festooned with medals, sashes and plumed hats. They looked good and they sounded good, speaking the language of Molière, the lingua franca of international relations.

"My father spoke French to Churchill, to Anthony Eden, to Mussolini," Romer recalled. He had been educated in Switzerland, acquiring language skills useful in Romer's second career.

Having spent the Second World War in London, Romer immigrated to Canada in 1948 to teach French language and literature at McGill, where the university's McLennan-Redpath library is staging an exhibition on his life and work.

"It's a collection of huge posters, with lots of text and a few photographs," Thérèse Romer said. "I think it will be hard for people to stand there and read. They do that at museums in Poland. Here, if it's more than 10 words, people won't read it."

That rueful assessment notwithstanding, Romer is a gracious, cheerful and positive person - as befits the eldest daughter of a diplomat.

"Many people think that diplomacy is cheating people and getting the upper hand," she said. "But my father always felt it must be based on building mutual trust. He tried all his life, but he lost his biggest battle, negotiating with Soviet Russia, where lying and cheating was the norm."

In 1942, the Polish government-in-exile in London appointed Romer ambassador to the Soviet Union. In that capacity, he met Stalin several times. Their last encounter was when the Soviet tyrant severed diplomatic relations because of Poland's request to have the International Red Cross investigate the mass murder of thousands of Polish officers in the Katyn forest. That experience and the subsequent Yalta Conference, which dashed all hope for a free Poland, took their toll on Romer. Her father's attempt to write his memoirs, Romer said, ended when the former diplomat suffered a heart attack while recalling the bitter disappointments of the era.

"He was at the front lines of all these terrible things that happened," said Romer, who choked up while recalling events that were literally heartaches for her father, who seldom spoke of his diplomatic career.

"As kids we never got the feeling they were in any sense victims," she said. "As we get older, we realize there are old traumas at the bottom of our hearts. It's there, it hurts, but it doesn't dominate our lives."

The Tadeusz Romer exhibition runs through next month at McGill's McLennan-Redpath Library, 3459 McTavish St.

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