Remembering my friend George Jonas, on his birthday

by Conrad Black

A secular celebration of the life of George Jonas was held at the Munk School of Global Affairs Wednesday, which would have been his 81st birthday. George recruited speakers in advance. Peter Munk, Mark Steyn, John O'Sullivan, and Anna Porter spoke of him with great and affecting eloquence and a good deal of humour. Also, as he had requested, my wife (George's former wife Barbara) read some of his poems and there was a fine edit of a lengthy television interview with him. Ivan Fecan was a very suave chairman of the occasion. I wrote when George died in January, in response to request from some of his readers in this newspaper, that I would publish these remarks, which are approximately what I said on Wednesday. It was a deeply moving occasion for a great man and a dear friend.

Having followed two men behind someone as husband of the same woman is not reliably the basis for a great friendship. But in the case of George Jonas and me, it was. When Barbara eventually accepted my proposal of marriage, after deducing that that was what it was – it was at least five minutes long and naturally included quotes from Lincoln and Roosevelt – she said that George Jonas would be part of the equation. I only knew him as a commentator, and so powerful was Cupid's arrow, I assumed the obstacle could be surmounted. In fact, it was a fortuitous dowry. Barbara has authorized me to tell you that

George was the world’s leading authority on how to talk her out of a tree. We started with that subject in common, and, as it turned out, many other shared interests as well.

From my first conversations with George nearly 25 years ago, I was drawn by the deliberate cadence of his speech. To converse with him was to return to the cafés by the Danube in Vienna and Budapest which I discovered as a wandering law student 50 years ago, where speech flowed at the stately pace of the river. Strong coffee and the scent of Turkish tobacco added to an unhurried, unexcitable ambiance. His subtly accented English was methodical, but never laborious and always elegant. With George, time always passed casually. Other than when he was on a motorcycle, George was never in too much of a hurry.

So uninterested in impressing or posturing was he that I only gradually realized how accomplished he was, how profound his culture, and what a polymath. Barbara gave me, when I asked for them, some of his books, but I came late to his poetry. He never told me that he was a poet, and I only really got into that when I reviewed The Jonas Variations, which revealed, modestly as always, how great was his familiarity with Western literature. As I reviewed the book, I read every word of it, but not the table of contents. So I never knew until last week that one of the poems in it was dedicated to me. He never mentioned it.

George was the perfect trans-cultural man: an admired writer in German, Hungarian and English, knowledgeable of many areas of science, as well as a skilled aviator and a competitive motorcyclist. He claimed that his formal education, largely under the communists, diminished his knowledge of all subjects. He was the perfect autodidact: as brilliant a teacher as he was a student. His intellectual curiosity never deserted him. In his prime, he was a debonair and even exotic figure, especially in the sober Toronto of earlier times.

He quickly became a dear friend for whom I developed an affection that is beyond my ability to express today. In my legal travails, he was constant and magnificent, in print and in private. He came to most of the court proceedings in Chicago. Normally, I went out to dinner with my daughter Alana, or a visitor, or most often with Mark Steyn, where we were such fixtures that we had our own tables at several restaurants and even made it on to the menu of one of them. When I returned to our hotel each night, I always dropped in for a snack and a digestif with George and his wife Maya and the lovely dog Daisy, whose ashes are buried now with George. In the midst of such an onslaught as that was, I needed good company and stimulation to soldier through it. George provided much of it, with a generosity I shall not forget.

He was not in the least a religious man, but many poems in The Jonas Variations deal with mortality. I think that from his observations of, and narrow escape from, the Nazi massacres and Soviet brutality in his early years in Budapest, and from his vast reading, George almost acquired a contempt for death that was useful to him when his time for it approached. He respected those who had thought it through, as best one can, and as he had. He hoped his writing would prolong awareness of him, and though he was irreligious, he yet had a notion of the world that was resolute though pessimistic. I think it was based on a cautious confidence that life in general would always have what it needed to go on, and this belief conferred upon him a sort of agnostic spirituality.

Barbara, who is less than fervently rabbinical herself, had asked a rabbi to marry them. George famously revealed to Rabbi Gunther Plaut that he had never set foot in a synagogue. The rabbi thought that George did not take his status as a Jew seriously enough for him to perform a religious ceremony for them. George replied: “I was a good enough Jew for Hitler and so I should be good enough for a Canadian reform rabbi.” The service was performed.

He allegedly had a bad temper at times, but I never saw it. Rather, he greeted all events with skeptical amusement. When a large party was put on for him for an important birthday, a musical group was found that could play traditional Hungarian folk music. When his time came to respond to a birthday toast, he said that he had fled Hungary certainly to escape the communists, but even more to escape traditional Hungarian folk music. He was an ardent and learned devotee of classical music.

He was the most unflusterable person I have met. Though he sometimes worried, nothing seemed really to disturb him. When he suffered a heart attack, about 20 years ago, and was being driven to an emergency ward, he lit up a cigarette, with the laconic comment that, “Even if I survive, I will be terrorized by doctors into giving up smoking, so I might as well have my last cigarette now either way.”

During the Soviet siege of Budapest when George was nine, his father told him, as plaster came down around their heads in a bomb shelter, that that excused him from reading Dante’s Inferno as an aunt had told him he must do. His father told him: “You can tell your aunt that Hell is making a house call.” After such a youth and after so much absorption of the sanguinary lore of Middle Europe, nothing overly dismayed him, and certainly not his own imminent demise.

I really only knew him well when his health had begun to decline. He fought his many infirmities with the tenacity of the fearless pessimist. As the descent toward mortality tormented him relentlessly, I saw him every two or three days. He never engaged in self-pity or betrayed anger or regret or spoke of himself at all. It was a brave struggle, as it had been, in all respects, a brave life.

I don’t think George had any idea how deeply he would be missed and how fondly remembered, or how much he enriched the lives of so many. If he had had a glimpse of that, in the

distinction made by one of his favourite sources of quotations, Dr. Samuel Johnson, George would be both surprised and astonished. We can imagine again the twinkle in his eye and the half-smile, and the brief wait for a witty reflection.

Our celebration of his life on his 81st birthday is tinged with the loss that afflicts us all that we will not be seeing him again. The poem by St. Ambrose that he graciously dedicated to me concludes that the hereafter is a “spacious atrium.” We can celebrate that George is now in the spacious atrium of the respect and affection of all who knew him and all who read him, and that he will reside there for all the days to come.

Several readers inquired why I did not include in my column last week about the centenary of the Battle of Jutland, as subsequent capital ship actions instances where battleships fired on other battleships in harbour (Mers-el-Kébir and Dakar, 1940, and Casablanca, 1942), or the sinking of the Scharnhorst in 1943. I thought the first were attacks on sitting ducks with limited ability to respond, and the last a chase where Scharnhorst did only the slightest damage to its more powerful adversary, HMS Duke of York. I meant fleet actions in open water with serious exchanges of heavy fire, and apologize for being unclear.

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