Henryk Slaby

(1925-2009)

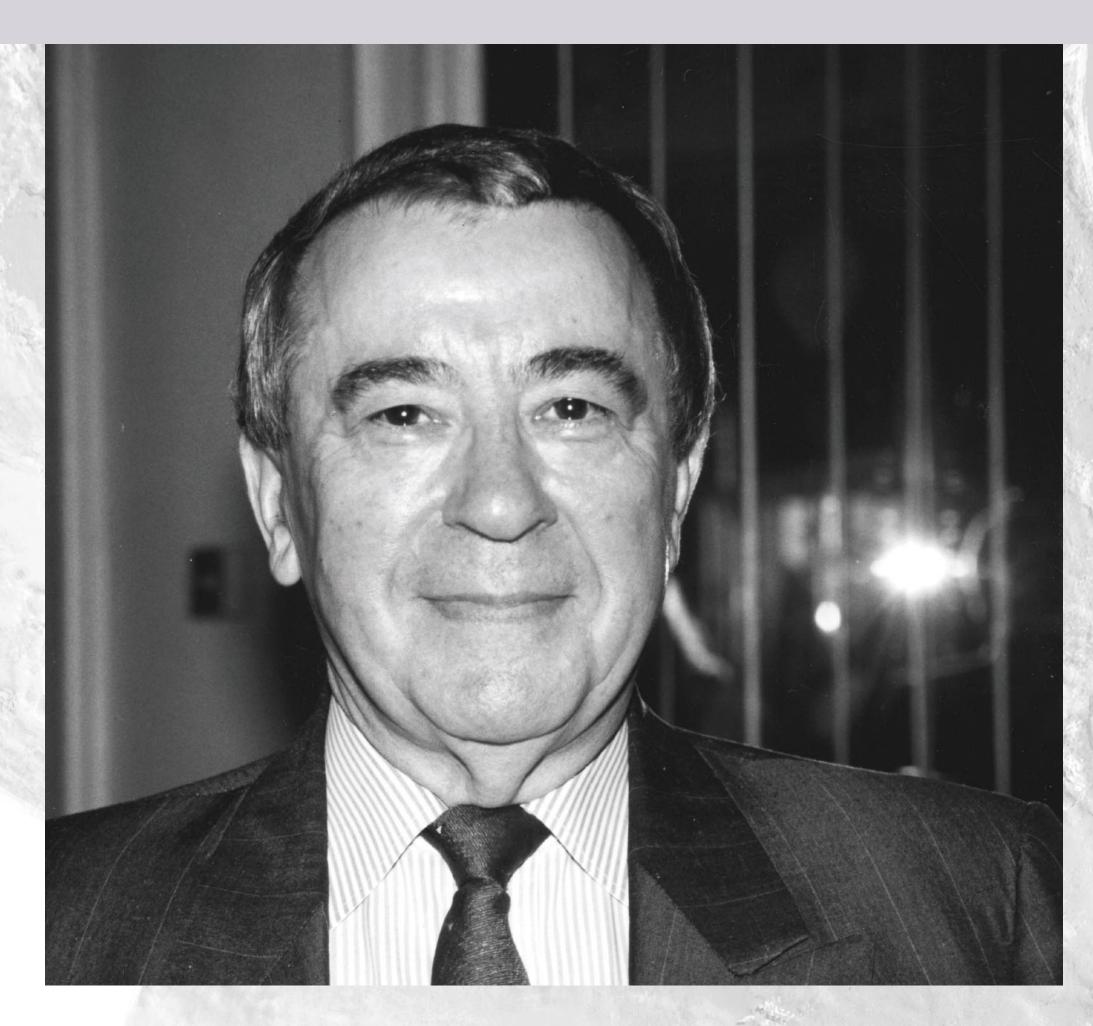## Political activist, philanthropist

At 16, Henryk Slaby worked as underground courier during the German occupation of Poland, was arrested by the Gestapo in 1941 and imprisoned at Auschwitz. He was transferred to Flossenburg concentration camp in Germany in December 1944, then miraculously escaped from one of the 'death marches' in which starving prisoners were forced to march from camp to camp ahead of the approaching Red Army. Finding himself in Soviet-occupied Czechoslovakia, he made his way to the U.S. Occupation Zone in Germany and eventually to Britain, where he finished high school and college.

Slaby immigrated to Canada in 1955, became a chartered accountant and rose to the top of his profession. Grateful to his adopted country, he got deeply involved in Canadian politics and was active in the Liberal Party from 1968 to 2001. Eager to promote knowledge of Canada in his mother country, he donated $250,000 to fund a Canadian Studies programme at the Jagiellonian University in Krakow (one of the oldest universities in Europe, and the alma mater of Nicholas Copernicus). Reciprocally, he was the co-donor of the $500,000 Slaby-Ungar Endowment Fund for Polish Language and Literature Studies at the University of Toronto. He also headed a $6 million fund-raising drive to found John Paul II College at the Catholic University in Lublin.

Ever a builder of cultural bridges, Slaby worked tirelessly to integrate Poles into Canadian life while promoting and preserving the distinctively Polish part of Canada's ethnic mosaic. He helped found four important Polish-Canadian charities – the Maximilian Kolbe, Mikolaj Kopernik, Wladyslaw Reymont, and Wladyslaw and Nelli Turzanski Foundations – as well as the Copernicus Lodge seniors' home and the John Paul II Cultural Centre in Toronto.

For his charitable and communal activities, Slaby was awarded the Medal of Merit with Star by the Polish government and the Medal of Saint Gregory by the Holy See.

Photos from top left clockwise:
• Henryk Slaby / Photo – Edward Zyman archive • H. Slaby with Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau / Photo – family archives • Copernicus Lodge – the beginning / Photo – Copernicus Lodge archives • The founders of Polish Studies at the University of Toronto / Yarek Dabrowski, *Punkt*.ca