

Otto Jelinek – Sept. 5, 2026



OTTAWA -- Otto Jelinek, a former world-champion figure skater and federal cabinet minister, has died at the age of 86.

"He was quite the ambitious guy," his younger brother Henry said Sunday, a day after Jelinek's death. "He was also sincerely and strongly a Canadian guy, who did everything he could to help this country."

Jelinek was born in Prague in 1940, and his family fled Czechoslovakia's communist government, arriving in Canada in 1952.

His father owned a successful cork factory in Prague and later rebuilt it in Oakville, Ont., a town between Toronto and Hamilton.

Jelinek and his sister Maria represented Canada in paired figure skating at the 1960 Winter Olympics in California.

In 1962, the pair won an emotional gold medal back in Prague, as champions of world figure skating. Henry said his siblings made the family proud by disproving the communist regime's propaganda of being the best system in the world.



The pair toured with the **Ice Capades** entertainment show while Jelinek became a sports commentator for CTV. He also started a company manufacturing hockey and figure skates.

In 1972, Jelinek entered federal politics, representing a Toronto riding before switching to the Oakville area. His 21 years in Parliament included a term as national revenue minister under then prime minister Brian Mulroney, as well as portfolios in sport and multiculturalism.

Jelinek described himself as politically right-of-centre, and he said he had been involved in backroom politics during the era of former prime minister John

Diefenbaker.

As a young MP, buried deep in the Tory opposition benches during the 1970s, Jelinek baited Liberal prime minister Pierre Trudeau as a closet communist.

When the Tories swept to power in 1984, Jelinek became minister of amateur sport, later adding multiculturalism, public works, and supply and services to his resume.

In 1989 he became revenue minister, implementing and defending the GST while fighting an uphill battle against cross-border shopping.

Jelinek once remarked that he would make a poor diplomat because he speaks his mind too easily, such as in 1991 when he suggested the Tory government may have taxed Canadians too aggressively — earning him the wrath of some cabinet colleagues.

"I have a view on everything," he told Hill reporters in 1993, such as saying Canada's multiculturalism policy "has played its role" and should be shelved.

"I for one resent being referred to as a hyphenated Canadian. I believe we have to get rid of hyphenated Canadians," he told reporters in a scrum.

Jelinek also said it was unfair Ottawa spends so much on health care "just because every time a little kid has a runny nose the mother takes him to a doctor."

That year, Jelinek was shuffled out of cabinet and he said he would not seek election.

Jelinek announced his eventual retirement from politics to reporters, saying he had told his riding executive he would run for the party leadership only 24 hours prior.

"I was set to go until I ran into these guys — my wife and my two boys, aged 10 and five years old. And suddenly life's reality hit home," Jelinek was quoted saying in a Canadian Press report, which noted his voice was cracking, with tears welling up in his eyes.

"It hit right where it counts — in the heart. Because these children have been growing up with a part-time father."

After politics, Jelinek took a job with a company that partnered with a firm that won the right to operate part of Pearson International Airport in Toronto, a move he said complied with conflict-of-interest rules.

The privatization of the airport was cancelled and became a major election issue. In 1994, Jelinek was among those who refused to testify to Parliament about the cancelled deal. The Bloc Québécois at the time threatened to subpoena him and others.

Jelinek later moved to the Czech Republic and launched a consultancy in Prague, focused on helping Canadian and U.S. businesses get established in eastern Europe. He returned to Canada to retire.

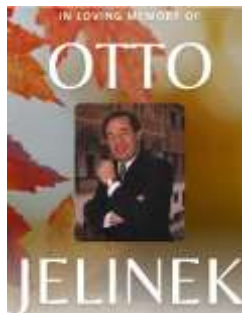
In 2013, then-prime minister Stephen Harper appointed Jelinek as Canadian Ambassador to the Czech Republic. The role included overseeing the lifting of visa requirements for Czech nations, which had become a thorny issue that threatened to derail a free trade-agreement with the European Union.

Henry Jelinek said the family marveled that they went from fleeing communism to having Jelinek represent Canada as ambassador in the country of his birth.

Jelinek said his brother spent much of his retirement alongside Lake Ontario, where he loved gardening, golf, tennis, Frank Sinatra songs and parties.

"He loves to tell stories which he often exaggerates a little bit," Henry Jelinek said. "If somebody would need something, he would be there -- always."

Jelinek died peacefully Saturday at the Trillium Health Centre in Mississauga, Ont., after living with Parkinson's disease for nearly 20 years, his brother said. "He took it with great heroism and dignity, to the very end."



<https://www.koprivataylor.com/obituaries/otto-jelinek>

