



# FASTFACTS



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## Remembering the Legacies of Joe Zuken

**T**wenty-seven years ago a friend called me up and asked if I would be interested in organizing Joe Zuken's bid to become the mayor of Winnipeg. Since my only plans for June of 1979 were to take a course on the history of Winnipeg, the choice seemed simple. Why study history when you have the opportunity to put your fingerprints on some Winnipeg history? It was a tumultuous four weeks, as crazy making as any political campaign, the highlight for me being the opportunity to listen to Zuken talk about the city's past as I drove him from meeting to meeting. One night I thought to myself, a biography of Joe Zuken would be a great vehicle for telling this community's story. Zuken's contribution to the city's history became a bit more official this past weekend when the Joseph Zuken Memorial Association and the Manitoba Historical Society unveiled a plaque honouring Zuken at an inner-city park, which is also named for Zuken.

At the time of his mayoral campaign, Zuken was at the pinnacle of his career as a tribune of the people. One of the longest serving members of Winnipeg city council he was both reviled for his political affiliation (for nearly 40 he had represented the Communist Party on both school board and city council) and revered for his eloquence and personal integrity (for Zuken public office was, indeed, a public trust and he was the scourge of those who sought to fatten themselves at the public purse). For each Winnipegger who was uneasy about having a Communist on city council, there was

another who didn't give a damn about Joe's politics; they counted on him to keep the other guys honest.

Zuken's campaign for mayor was a bit of a ten-day wonder, since the prospect of a major North American city (even a city as small and remote as Winnipeg) electing a Communist as mayor elevated what should have been a sleepy municipal by-election into an international story (albeit a fleeting story). The election, which was called because the previous mayor, Robert A. Steen, had succumbed to cancer, was also a bit of a circus. There were a dozen candidates, including several other sitting city councillors and a former senior adviser to NDP premier Ed Schreyer. One NDP councillor who was running for mayor, began to argue that Zuken and his supporters were in the process of infiltrating the New Democratic Party, even going so far as to claim that over 300 New Democrats were working for Zuken. CJOB's Peter Warren unleashed a torrent of abuse aimed at Zuken—essentially accusing him of, among other things, plotting the breakdown of “the old moral virtues, honesty, sobriety, self-restraint, faith in the pledged word, ruggedness.”

I was one of those New Democrats working for Zuken—and I can state with some confidence that there were far fewer than 300 campaign volunteers in total, let alone 300 New Democrats. Those New Democrats who supported Zuken, did so for the same reason that voters had been electing him for nearly four decades: his integrity, his commitment,



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and his honesty. Many, in particular, were attracted by his commitment to the inner city and his opposition to city council's subservience to the local property development industry.

When Zuken was first elected to council in 1962, he began campaigning for a hospital in North End Winnipeg and 1965 was the head of a city committee to establish such a facility. Zuken is often remembered as a gadfly, a keen and outspoken critic of the establishment. But as the chair of the city's hospital committee, and later as chair of the Seven Oaks Hospital Board, he demonstrated his ability to create a lasting community resource. In 1981, after nearly 20 years of campaigning on the part of Zuken (and the work of many others, who Zuken also was careful to credit), Seven Oaks Hospital admitted its first patients. Zuken impressed Gudmundur Myrdal, the hospital's executive director, with his patient and meticulous approach to building and running a hospital. At the same time, Myrdal recalled, once Zuken was convinced of the merit of a cause "he would fight like hell to accomplish it. He was always working for the people who he thought were taking the dirty end of the stick. It took me a long time to fully appreciate him in terms of the depth of his thinking, his fairness, just what a great person he was."

The gadfly side of Joe Zuken's personality was front and centre when he took on the dominant group at city council for its approach to the development of Portage and Main. In a series of behind-closed doors meetings, the Independent Citizen's Election Committee (the pro-business coalition that controlled council) put together a deal that not only subsidized the giant Trizec Corporation's development of the south-west corner of the intersection but would ban street-level pedestrian crossing, forcing pedestrians through a corporately owned, underground mall.

The day after the ban went into effect Zuken made good on a promise he had made when the issue had been debated in council—he crossed the street. It was a cold and blowy March day, but he led a dozen other protestors, including three people in wheelchairs on a circuit that took them to the four corners of Portage and Main. They were protesting not only the way public space had been turned into private space, but the decades-long relationship between the dominant group and the developers. As Zuken

said, "the dominant group at city hall would even sell the city hall if they thought they could make a profit on it."

In the end Bill Norrie, another sitting councillor, handily won the 1979 election, although Joe came in a very respectable second. However, I can still remember him commenting to me that night that the people of inner-city Winnipeg deserved far more than moral victories.

A modest man and an introvert—despite his successes as a lawyer, actor, and politician, Zuken was uncomfortable with praise. It is good to see that 20 years after his death that his memory and legacy are still being honoured. Not that he was beyond criticism—his continued affiliation with the Communist Party certainly perplexed and troubled many of his admirers. But when we think of the inner city, it is still useful to make use of Joe's optic: to remind ourselves that there is a duty to identify and decry the ways in which people are being exploited and marginalized—and that there is even a greater responsibility to address those needs, not just in the future, but today.

- Doug Smith

Doug Smith is the author of *Joe Zuken: Citizen and Socialist*, published by James Lorimer and Company.

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