

Obituaries

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PERCY SALTZMAN, TV WEATHERMAN 1915-2007

Shy and introverted in person, he bloomed under the spotlight, writes **SANDRA MARTIN**. He always considered himself a meteorologist, first and foremost. At home, he kept a barometer in every downstairs room

Referring to himself as the face "that launched a thousand slips" on Canadian television, weatherman Percy Saltzman jotted down some memories of his three-decade career in 1986. "I had no biz in showbiz, no background, no training, no experience, either as actor or announcer or presenter or whatever," he wrote. But that was his unvarnished charm. He looked as earnest as a Prairie preacher and twice as reliable with his horn-rimmed glasses (although the frames were empty because of the danger of glare from the television lights), his slightly rumpled jacket and the trademark piece of chalk that he would ritually throw in the air (and almost always catch) at the end of his evening weather forecast.

During his career, he broadcast 2,500 weather reports on radio, another 5,657 on TV and conducted 1,000 interviews. Unscripted, unbridled, prone to outrageous puns and extemporaneous cracks, Mr. Saltzman had a deadpan delivery that belied his lively intelligence and his forceful questions as an interviewer. He once asked photographer Yousuf Karsh what he charged for a sitting. "Incredible that the CBC should permit such a question," Mr. Karsh fulminated.

"He was very bright, very well read, but somebody who lived in his intellect," said his younger son, Paul Saltzman. "He came out of the Depression in Western Canada and that kind of skewed his values. He was an armchair socialist, but that didn't translate into action."

Introverted in person, Mr. Saltzman came alive when the spotlight turned on him. "He was a very shy man, but he compensated for that by being a performer. Underneath, he found it difficult to be close to people, so he had many admirers but few friends," said Paul Saltzman.

Aaron Saltzman, a CBC reporter in Calgary, recalled going to the Gemini Awards as an eight-year-old with his grandfather. "He walked up on stage, and the big spotlight came on, and he transformed immediately," he told *The Canadian Press*. "He became this performer, larger than life and cracking jokes. It was someone that I didn't know."

Percy Saltzman was born in Winnipeg, the eldest of three sons of shopkeeper Solomon and Elizabeth (née Ross) Saltzman. His father, who was born in Ukraine, came to Canada in 1911 and married four years later. The Saltzmans moved to Neudorf, Sask., with their infant son Percy, and operated a general store, selling groceries, hardware, guns, bolts of material and other bulk items. His siblings

Morris (1918-1988), Eva (1921-1971) and Kenneth (1924) were all born in Neudorf before the family pulled up stakes and moved to Vancouver in 1925.

An excellent student, Mr. Saltzman went to Dawson Public School and King George High School, winning Governor-General Lord Willingdon's Silver Medal for coming first in the province in the final exams. After that, he enrolled in a bachelor of arts degree at the University of British Columbia, where he studied life sciences and won two scholarships.

After graduating in 1934, he made his way to Montreal by working as an animal tender on a cattle train. His parents' grocery store business had foundered during the Depression and they had moved to Los Angeles with their youngest son, Ken. Mr. Saltzman, rarely — if ever — saw them again, but following his mother's wishes, he studied medicine for a year at McGill University, having overcome "McGill's anti-Semitic exclusion quota," as he later wrote on his website. He didn't like medicine, and he was broke, so he dropped out.

About the same time, he met Rose Kogan, a refugee who had been born on the Russian-Romanian border and who had fled the brutal aftermath of the Russian Revolution. They married in Montreal in 1935. She worked in a dress factory, and he found a variety of jobs — a fur operator in a clothing store, a waiter, a printer and even an envelope opener in a puzzle contest.

The Saltzmans moved to Toronto in 1937, where the ever-adept Mr. Saltzman learned linotyping, a trade he worked at until 1943. Their son Earl, a now-retired computer systems consultant, was born in 1942, followed by Paul, a film director and producer, a year later. After Rose died in 1988, Mr. Saltzman married Audrey (née Modeland) Ford in 1990.

Mr. Saltzman found his vocational calling during the Second World War. In 1943, the federal government was searching for meteorologists to work in the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan, both as weather forecasters and as trainers to give pilots and navigators the rudiments of the atmospheric sciences. Although he had no formal training in the discipline, he had exceptional skills in mathematics and physics, which enabled him to qualify as a meteorologist after completing a concentrated course in the subject.

He served in nine stations, eventually becoming chief of the wartime weather office at Malton (now Pearson International) Airport. Having to explain the weather busi-

ness, often to French- and Polish-speaking airmen, using blackboard and chalk and basic vocabulary, probably honed the presentation skills that were such a plus later on in his broadcasting career. After the war, he stayed on at the Dominion Weather Service head office in Toronto.

Mr. Saltzman began doing weather broadcasts on the radio for the CBC, and proposed making the switch to television at his wife's urging, according to his older son, Earl. His career before the cameras began on Sept. 8, 1952, the day that TV officially began in Canada. Mug shots of the fugitive Boyd Gang flashed on screens in the Toronto area followed by the opening credits for *Uncle Chichimus and Hollyhock*, a puppet show produced by Norman Campbell. The next image was the earnest and bespectacled

After leaving the CBC, Percy Saltzman worked for CTV on the show Canada AM from 1972 to 1974, above. He then moved to CITY-TV for a year before going freelance for the next five years. He ended his TV career at Global, where he appeared from 1980 to 1982. In 2003, he was invested to the Order of Canada by Governor General Adrienne Clarkson

Percy Saltzman, wearing a sports jacket and a tie, the only human on the show, making him the first person to appear live on Canadian TV.

The idea of putting a weatherman on a puppet show came from Mr. Campbell, later known as a TV producer and one of the creators of the musical *Anne of Green Gables*. He was from B.C., where he had studied math and physics at the University of British Columbia and then joined the Meteorological Service of Canada, which posted him to Sable Island off Nova Scotia during the war.

Mr. Campbell abandoned the weather to join the fledgling TV network in Toronto in 1952. After meeting Mr. Saltzman in the cafeteria one day, Mr. Campbell invited him to do his weather gig on *Uncle Chichimus and Hollyhock*, according to his widow, Elaine. "Norman really appreciated Percy's sense of humour and his wonderfully genuine attitude about everything in life. He was so warm and personable." One night, Mr. Campbell had him dangling from "the lighting grid to do his weather forecast, with his famous chalk, making it look as though he was hanging from the ceiling."

He was soon lured away to do the weather on *Stop Watch and Listen* and then *Tabloid*, a daily current-

curacy and archived in order to compile a long-term meteorological record for the country. After a full day's work as a meteorologist, he would "hop on bike and pedal to CBLT on Jarvis Street, there to peddle my foggy, foggy dew," as he wrote on his website decades later. He resigned from the federal weather service in 1968.

His daily TV forecasts routinely began at 4 p.m. with a phone call to the meteorologist on duty at the airport. After getting a detailed report, he would spend the next hour comparing it with conditions in teletype reports from about 200 of the 1,300 weather stations that stretched across the country in the early 1950s; augmented by reports from stations in the United States. He'd digest all of this data, make himself a simplified weather map, analyze the atmospheric and climactic conditions, then check the teletype machines for updates at 5:30 p.m. Then he would grab his chalk and head for the studio to make his daily broadcast at 6.

He did interviews, too, but the weather is what most people remember about him. "Even people who don't much care what sort of weather is on the way watch Saltzman faithfully," Mr. Olson reported in *Maclean's* in 1954. "They like to see him point out the birthplace in the Arctic of the blizzard, which will soon be around their windows, or watch him trace the curve along which warm air is sweeping from the Gulf of Mexico. He tends to personify weather, symbolizing with a broad curve the 'high' resting serenely over the Prairies or indicating with jagged strokes the rain from a villainous warm front 'kicking up a fuss' in the southwest. And all winter, he says, there is a cold air mass which 'just sits and broods' in the Far North."

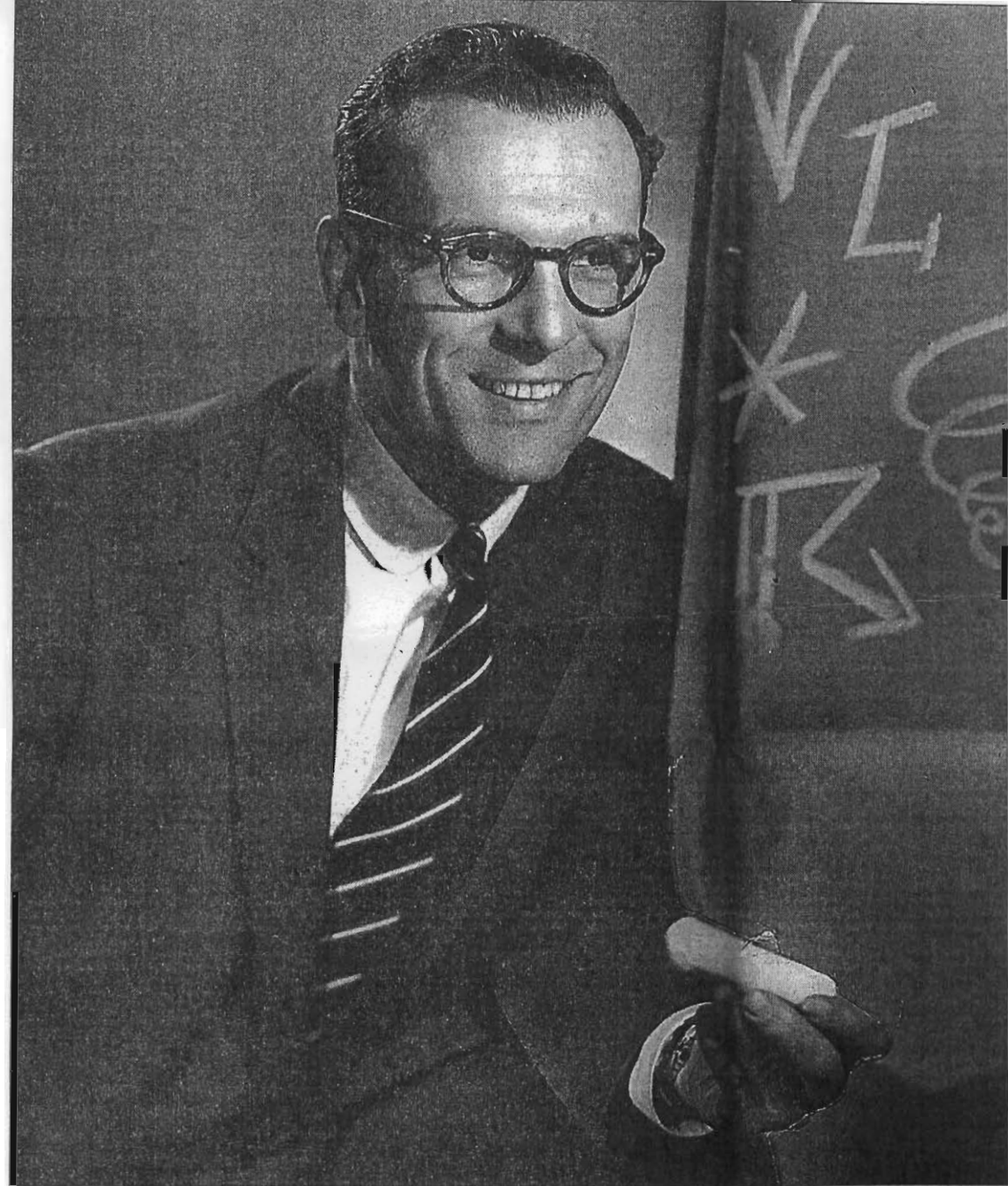
He worked for CBC-TV for 20 years before moving to the rival Canadian Television Network, where he appeared weekdays on *Canada AM*, its flagship morning program, from 1972 to 1974. He then moved to CITY-TV for a year before going freelance for the next five years. He ended his TV career at Global, where he appeared from 1980 to 1982.

He was an avid reader of biographies and magazines and newspapers. As recently as last month, he was blogging on a personal website that he had constructed. Just before Christmas, he suffered some soft-tissue damage in his shoulder and chest while getting out of bed one morning, according to Earl. "It took all of the strength out of him, probably because of his age."

Among other honours, he received the Order of Canada in 2003 and was made a member of the Canadian Broadcast Hall of Fame in 2004.

Percy Saltzman was born in Winnipeg on March 11, 1915. He died at home in Toronto on Jan. 15, 2007, of a stroke after suffering a short illness. He was 91. He is survived by his wife, Audrey, sons Earl and Paul, three grandchildren, two great-grandchildren, and his younger brother Kenneth. He was predeceased by his first wife, Rose.

A private family memorial is being planned.



Percy Saltzman in 1957. On stage or on TV, 'he became this performer, larger than life and cracking jokes.' He took his weatherman role seriously. After a full day's work as a meteorologist, he would go to the CBC studios and prepare his famous chart, below, for broadcast. He left the federal weather service only in 1968.

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