

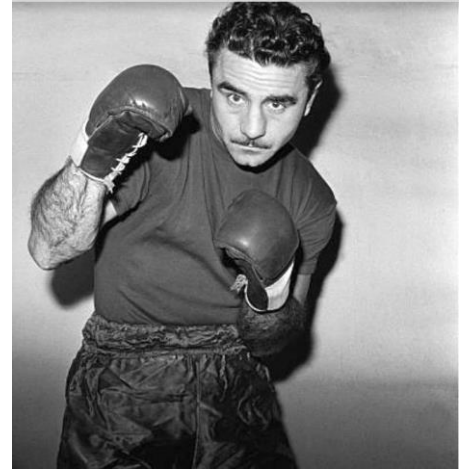
# The remarkable career of Laszlo Papp, denied world glory by a rigid political regime

By Patrick Myler

Three-time Olympic Games gold medal winner and twice European amateur champion with just 12 losses in over 300 unpaid contests. Turning pro at the age of 31, he remained unbeaten in 29 fights until the Hungarian government drew down the shutters on his career on the grounds that fighting for pay was incompatible with the country's socialist principles.

Laszlo Papp's story is truly one of the most remarkable in ring history.

At the time of his forced retirement in 1964, *The Ring* rated him the No. 4 contender for Joey Giardello's world middleweight title. Many experts believed he had the ability to lift the crown from the unpredictable American. Sadly, his own country's rulers ensured he never got that chance.



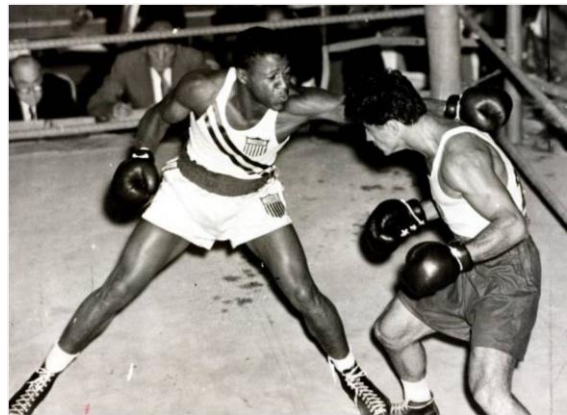
*Laszlo Papp*

“I believe I had a good chance of winning the title as I had defeated others who had beaten Giardello,” Papp said years later. “It was my biggest disappointment in life.”

Born in a working class district of Budapest, Laszlo inherited his love of boxing from his father, though initially he preferred sports like soccer, track and wrestling. After much cajoling from friends, he agreed to join them at an amateur boxing club and soon showed a natural aptitude for the sport.

Though short for a middleweight at under 5ft 6ins, his awkwardly effective southpaw style and strong punch took him through an impressive winning run leading to his first Olympics competition in London in 1948. He won all five of his bouts to capture the gold medal.

While such success encouraged most other countries' winners to move on to professional careers, Papp's ambition to do likewise was thwarted by his government's rigid anti-capitalist stance. Hungary was then part of the Soviet Bloc and professional boxing was on the banned list.



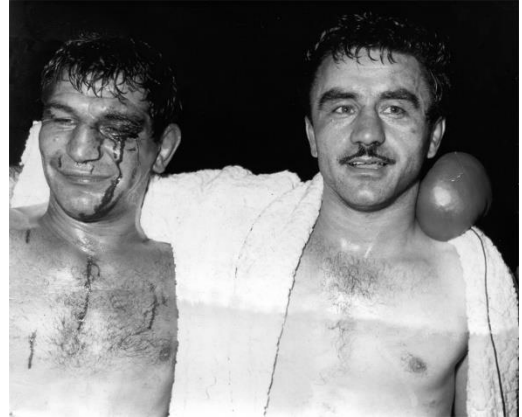
*Spider Webb vs Papp 1952 Olympics*

Laszlo resigned himself to pursuing further amateur honours. Paring his weight down to compete at light-middleweight, he continued to outclass all opposition in capturing two more Olympic gold medals, at Helsinki in Finland in 1952 (including a KO of American Ellsworth "Spider" Webb) and at Melbourne in Australia in 1956, beating Puerto Rico's Jose Torres, a future professional world champion, in the final.

Papp was the first boxer from any country to complete the prestigious Olympic treble. It was not until 20 or more years later that the Cuban pair of Teofilo Stevenson and Felix Savon emulated that remarkable feat.

Announcing his intention to turn professional, he was somewhat grudgingly granted permission by his government, though reminded that he would not be able to box in Hungary, where the sport was banned.

Basing himself in Vienna, Austria, he had his first 11 fights in Austria and West Germany. He showed his exceptional talents by stopping highly regarded German Peter Mueller three times and impressively outscoring American world title contender Ralph “Tiger” Jones. (*Pic Mueller and Papp, 3<sup>rd</sup> Fight*)



This led to his capture of the European middleweight title with a seventh round stoppage of Denmark's Christian Christensen on May 16, 1962. Over the next two years, he turned back the challenges of six ambitious contenders, with only gritty Irishman Mick Leahy, in Lazlo's last contest, managing to last the 15-round distance.



*Mick Leahy vs Papp*

With a world title challenge to Giardello in the United States looming on his agenda, his hopes were dashed when he was summoned to a “consultation” in Budapest and told that his exit visa, enabling him to train and fight outside Hungary, was being revoked.

Though bitterly disappointed, Papp accepted that his ring career was over. He coached the national amateur team from 1971 to 1992 and was warmly received in whatever country he visited.

Laszlo was inducted into the International Boxing Hall of Fame in 2001, two years after World Boxing Council president Jose Sulaiman granted him honorary world champion status.

Papp died, aged 77, on October 16, 2003, after a long illness. He was survived by his wife and son.

Author Jim McNeill paid him a worthy tribute in *They Could've Been Contenders*: “Laszlo Papp will best be remembered as the fabulous fighter whose country did not want him to be a contender, much less know him as a champion. Politically, he had become a red face to an already outdated red regime.”

**Patrick Myler is a boxing writer and author whose books include biographies of Gentleman Jim Corbett and Dan Donnelly. He lives in Dublin, Ireland**