

# Woldemar Neufeld

As a young boy living in pre-Revolutionary Russia, Woldemar Neufeld would sit with his engineer father and examine his beloved mentor's drawings and designs. They also took tours together of his grandfather's nearby factory to look at his latest inventions and photographs.



This early bond, nurtured in a small Mennonite village in southern Russia, was the foundation for Woldemar's artistic career that would find its full expression in Waterloo.

The relationship between father and son was violently broken in 1920 when his father, Heinrich Neufeld, was executed. Woldemar had already endured years of separation from his father who had served in the medical corps during the First World War. The young Neufeld had sent his drawings, often of trains and bridges, to his father on the front.

The years just before and after his father's death were filled with violence, hunger and destruction for the Neufeld family. In 1923 his mother Eliese Reimer married a Mennonite minister and within a year the large blended family fled to Canada.

When a 15-year-old Woldemar arrived at the train station in Kitchener two days after Christmas in 1924, he and his family were met with a horse and sleigh and driven through Victoria Park where skaters waltzed to music. "It was so beautiful. I had never seen anything like it," said Neufeld.

"We were shuffled from place to place in Russia . . . when I arrived in Waterloo it was a revelation," the artist once said. "I thought, 'this will be my home and I will paint it.' The very fact that I came to Waterloo where all of a sudden I felt secure after being hunted in Russia is the main reason I come back to Waterloo."

The Neufeld family was boarded out to several families before buying a home at 35 Church (now Central) Street. After two years at Central School he entered Waterloo College preparatory school at Waterloo Lutheran Seminary – now Wilfrid Laurier.

In 1933 he established his own art studio in an unheated room on the second floor of a building at 62 King Street South in Waterloo. He helped establish the Art Society of Kitchener and studied in the evening at the Ontario College of Art in Toronto.

During these years he began creating prints of Waterloo buildings and landscape paintings of the rural lifestyle.

"I saw beautiful old buildings being destroyed in Russia," he said. "When we came to Waterloo, I saw buildings I liked and wondered if they too would disappear. I'd heard rumours Willison Hall was to be demolished so I painted it. A year later it was gone."

Many other buildings memorialized by Neufeld have been demolished including the Albert Street fire station and market, and the Waterloo Town Hall.

Neufeld went on to study at the Cleveland Institute of Art, and at Case Western Reserve University. He and his wife, Waterloo-born Peggy Conrad, lived for a time in New York City, and then settled with their four children in New Milford, Connecticut. His works are included in such prestigious collections as the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York; the Cleveland Museum of Art, and the Library of Congress in Washington D.C.

In 1988 Woldemar Neufeld received an honorary Doctor of Letters degree from Wilfrid Laurier University. Ten years later the City of Waterloo and the Neufeld family transferred the 300-piece art collection to Wilfrid Laurier University to be held in trust.

*Photo courtesy of Wilfrid Laurier University*