GUELPH'S MISUNDERSTOOD MOGUL

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THERE'S NO JOSEPH WOLFOND THEATRE AT THE RIVER RUN CENTRE. THERE'S NO JOSEPH WOLFOND WAY AT THE UNIVERSITY. THERE IS A WOLFOND CRESCENT BUT IT'S SHORT, TUCKED AWAY IN THE OLD UNIVERSITY NEIGHBOURHOOD, LARGELY UNKNOWN. JOSEPH WOLFOND MADE A FIRM AND LASTING IMPRINT ON OUR CITY BUT THERE'S LITTLE EVIDENCE THIS CITY KNOWS MUCH AT ALL ABOUT HIM.

Days after Joe Wolfond died in 1978, an editorial ran in the Mercury bearing the headline "Joe Wolfond's Memorials."

"Joe Wolfond certainly won't lack memorials in his adopted City of Guelph. They are all around in the form of the businesses, stores, industries and homes he constructed," it reads.

It's true in a way. You can't go anywhere in the downtown without seeing the outcome of Joe Wolfond's work.

But 30 years after he died, his story seems to have all but faded away.

If you enter Woodlawn Cemetery from the southeast, the first headstone you'll see is one of the few memorials bearing Joseph Wolfond's name. It says little - his name and the years of his birth and death in English and Hebrew.

Bushes and pink begonias grow in front and stones have been placed on top to signify the presence of visitors in the Jewish tradition.

The significance of Joe Wolfond's stamp on Guelph is without dispute among those who make it their business to know this city's story.

Yet, little has been written about him. There's no clippings file on him at the library. An index to historical society publications offers one reference, but it's hardly worth pulling it from the shelf. It gives him a fraction of a sentence as a contractor who had purchased and demolished the Capitol Theatre.

A Mercury article written in the week after he died, bearing the headline "He built a city," says he was "instrumental to developing much of Guelph's downtown."

An editorial that same week says he "enjoyed an incredible life that would have provided the plots for many bestselling books except he'd never let himself be interviewed by writers."

But he did talk to a reporter, likely in the 1950s, about his treacherous journey from his homeland, across Europe and into fame and fortune in Guelph.

He spoke about being cold and penniless, traveling furtively across the continent. The reporter describes a "far away

look in his eye . . . a hard look for the men who caused his misery."

His family seems a proud one. His son Mel offers me a driving tour of Guelph through the eyes of a Wolfond. I'm struck by just how much of the city was formed by this one family.

Joseph Wolfond arrived in Guelph in 1922. He was in his late teens.

He'd left the newly formed Soviet Union at a time when being Jewish was dangerous. Dozens had been killed in the city of Chisinau in Moldova, prompting mass emigration of Jews to the West.

The ones who were killed "saved millions of Jews," Mel Wolfond says, by spurring the emigration.

Joe escaped from a Soviet prison at 15 and snuck around Europe for almost two years before he arrived in England. He wore the same shirt for a year, he told a Mercury reporter in the 1950s. He had two mismatched, worn boots.

He sent a letter to a New York newspaper in search of his father, and heard back from an uncle who said the elder Wolfond had settled in Ontario. He arrived here in 1922 with his mother and a sister who had also made it to England.

The family had nothing. They were penniless and had a hard time getting jobs. Joe and his father became junk peddlers. They had no horses so they pulled the carts themselves.

"It was very difficult to make a living," says Isidor Weisz, a Guelph resident and close friend of Joe Wolfond. "He had to deal with small little things, wherever he could make a dollar."

"My first memory," Mel offers, pausing, "Someone delivered a live fish on Thursdays. You couldn't take a bath because the fish was in the tub."

The junk business became a scrapyard, then a demolition business, and later a construction company.

One of Mel's early projects was in the Water Street area. That's a stop on his driving tour of Guelph. He points out the gardens beside McCrae House. His father donated that land to the museum, he says.

He points out Honey Crescent.

"I named this street after my bride, my honey."

Guelph's other Wolfond monument is somewhat more informative. It's a plaque on a stone at Joseph Wolfond Memorial Park, across the river from Goldie Mill. It's a popular spot but the plaque, though prominent, draws few. It gives 1904 as his birth date; the stone at the cemetery gives 1905. Mel says no one really knew when his father was born. He had two life insurance policies, each with a different birth date.

It tells us he came from Kyiv, actually a village near Kyiv, Mel says.

"Joseph Wolfond loved this city," the memorial plaque says. "He was a creative thinker and an innovative builder, who spearheaded change with a strong sense of civic responsibility, commitment and pride."

Joe Wolfond gave some of the park's land to the city, and his sons gave more after his death, along with money to put in the playground equipment.

"He started from scratch," Weisz says. But when he became comfortable, he never hesitated to share, particularly during the Great Depression.

"I heard (stories) from many people. He went into a household with some people and noticed they were very poor and (it was) very hard to make a living so he left money for food," Weisz says.

"He was generous in the days when there was hardship," but he remained humble.

"He hated if somebody called him a millionaire," Weisz says. "He didn't like to show off."

"Even if he was a very wealthy man, they still liked him because he was a very fair man. He wasn't a grabber," Weisz says.

He had a beautiful big bungalow on Stuart Street, surrounded by well-kept grounds. Everybody in town knew him, Weisz says.

Walking down the street, all you'd hear is "Joe, Joe, Joe," as everyone greeted him.

"While he owned millions, he would bargain over a $2 piece of metal, because that's what he loved to do," local historian Gil Stelter says.

"He could be involved in a great big project, but would also buy up leftover bricks from somebody," says former mayor Norm Jary.

There were a few Jewish families in Guelph then. Families first came from Eastern Europe early in the century. The congregation met in homes until 1925, then they bought a little redbrick building on Surrey Street. The rabbi lived upstairs.

In the late 1940s, the community built a synagogue on the property.

Joe Wolfond was already well off by then. He donated the cement work, had his crew pour the footings. He gave some cash, and ensured there was a cornerstone to his father, Henry, past president of the congregation, and his mother, Bella.

He was on the board of the synagogue, and heavily involved.

"When you build a church or a synagogue, you have to have some good standing people to donate more than just money," Weisz says.

In the 1930s, Joe built the Royal Theatre on Macdonell Street, which now houses the Palace nightclub.

He asked his wife to send a worker to get a truck they needed for the construction. The truck started with a crank. It had no floorboards. You could see the road as you drove. Instead of delegating the task, Esther Wolfond brought the truck herself.

"He couldn't believe it," Mel says.

"It doesn't pay to keep your eyes shut in Guelph these pre-Christmas days, in more ways than one," reads a Mercury article from December 1952. "With soldier-like precision and atom-like devastation, the face of the Royal City is undergoing a radical change for the better, and unless you keep your wits about you one of these days you'll be confronted with a dilemma: I'm sure that building was there the last time I passed this way!"

"It can happen as easily as that, and Joe Wolfond, the man who has the reputation of being able to build them up as quickly as he can knock them down, doesn't pretend to be a sentimentalist."

Guelph was the first Ontario city with a free public library. The classical Grecian library, built in 1905 with funds from philanthropist Andrew Carnegie, became a symbol one of the bigger controversies surrounding Joe Wolfond.

By the 1960s, there was talk of a new library. The city asked Mel Wolfond, by then a young architect, to look into whether the existing building was salvageable.

"It was falling apart," he says. "Regardless of whether they kept it, they would've had to extend it. My recommendation was to build a new library."

"It was a civic thing to do," he says. "It was a mistake getting involved.

"It was suggested that my father and I were responsible for the library being taken down. It's not true. The controversy is new", Mel says. At the time, people were glad to be getting a more modern, more usable library. Then he gets pensive.

"Carnegie would be mad, wouldn't he?"

John Snell doesn't seem to think so. As chief librarian in the 1950s and '60s, he knew the building perhaps more than anyone else. It was crumbling, he says. The columns which looked like marble but were actually precast stone were falling apart. The dome leaked, the 23 steps leading up from street level were hardly practical, and the 20-foot ceilings made it a nightmare to heat.

"I thought it was more like a monument than a public building."

The Mercury at the time called the demolition "one of the hottest controversies the city has experienced in many years."

You used to go to the Customs House in St. George's Square to get your mail, before Canada Post delivered. When the post office moved out, the deteriorated building went up for sale. A deal to save it fell through. Joseph Wolfond bought it, and it came down at the hands of his contractors.

"The trumpets and the shouting have died, the words for and against have been said and today the final decision was underlined when workmen and hammers and crowbars began demolishing the former customs building on St. George's Square," the Mercury wrote in late 1960.

The Wolfonds built the Bank of Nova Scotia building that's there now.

Mel argues saving the building wasn't his family's responsibility.

They were asked to buy it by the city, and told they'd have to do things like put in municipal washrooms. "We just opted not to get involved," he says.

If he was a well-loved figure while he was alive, he's become something of a controversial one in death. In the 1950s and '60s, there was plenty of support for renewing the city, for bringing down the stone buildings and replacing them with hallmarks of the future.

Today, it's hard to look at pictures of the Customs House and Carnegie library and understand that reasoning. And it's easy to try to assign blame. ”(Joseph Wolfond) didn't make the decisions on the demolitions," Stelter says. "He got the jobs because he was the major demolition company."

"I think at the time, people were not interested in preservation of our heritage; they were only interested in the new," says Eileen Hammill, a lifelong Guelph resident.

"There was a small movement in the city to prevent it. Our downtown was a very homey, handsome downtown but we'd come out of the war and people wanted change."

"But there were people who fought to preserve the old buildings," says Norm Harrison, who was a city planner from 1968 to 1995.

"As a stranger to the city I'd just been to Europe for four months before I got the job here. I was amazed to find an Ontario town that looked like that," he says.

"There was a dedicated group of people saying this wasn't right," Harrison says.

There was no heritage act at the time and even when it was introduced in 1975, it had little power.

A local architectural group fought to save each of the heritage buildings. By the end of the 1960s, the members were burned out and the group closed. And by 1975, the last of the major stone banks in the square had come down.

"Many people still look back at it and say how did they allow this to come down, how did they allow that to come down?" Harrison says.

Joe Wolfond remains legendary for his intuitive sense of building.

"He could tell how big a beam was required for a building," says Stelter, author of most of the little work that has been written about the family's impact on Guelph.

"One builder was putting in a steel beam and Joe said that beam was six inches too short. They ignored him and then they had to take it down," he says.

The Wolfond scrapyard was "the precursor to recycling," says James Gordon, the singer-songwriter who grew up alongside Joe Wolfond's grandkids.

"It was a throwback to another era."

You could buy used lumber, pipes, frames, windows anything that came from the demolition of a building.

Joe Wolfond worked all his life. "No way, he never retired," Weisz says. "I don't think he had a hobby. He didn't golf. His hobby was to go around and try to make deals."

"As long as he was alive he was involved with me," Mel says. "We used to get up in the morning and go from job to job."

Mel is a man of few words, and he says little about the kind of man his father was.

"He was a Guelphite," he offers simply.

He learned English in night school, then taught the GCVI auto shop teacher everything he knew in exchange for practice speaking his new language.

"He was very bright, sensitive. He never swore. He was brilliant. He was just a natural. He didn't golf. He worked hard. I golfed a bit," Mel says. "He and I both worked from sun up to sun down. He was quite comfortable later on. That never affected him; nothing changed for him."