

A Tribute

TO THE NJC FOUNDER LEONARD T. WILDE (1912-1965)

By Peter H. Hebb '57



Leonard Wilde

From the Toronto Gala Toast to Leonard Wilde by Peter Hebb '57 2016.10.15

"We students in the first 9 class years of NJC trusted Leonard Wilde. He and his successors have trusted us. His basic program has been continued throughout the 60 years represented here tonight. We alumni eclipsed our former schoolmates back in Canada, and gained independence in travel, an understanding of world issues, and the ability to make decisions for ourselves. Whether we knew him or not, we thank him for his gift to us."

Leonard Thornton Wilde, the founder of Neuchâtel Junior College (NJC) was a kind, courteous, soft-spoken, well-dressed gentleman with an extraordinary vision. He felt that the university city of Neuchâtel in French-speaking Switzerland could be a great location for students to learn of the civilization and culture of Europe, while immersed in learning French. Although he lacked experience as an educational administrator, his passion for teaching, his education, his command of languages, and his career and travel experiences equipped him with the unique qualities to bring the vision to reality.

Various alumni from the 10 academic years of Wilde's direction have researched and written about his years at the College, and some even sleuthed out details of his final resting place near Knutsford, the town of his birth (10 miles south of Manchester Airport). This article is a compilation of efforts by alumni and some former faculty and staff to discover more of his background, what seems to have motivated his successful drive to establish NJC, and how the early years of the College's existence led to the format and programs that are still carried on today as the College thrives in its seventh decade.

Wilde did not speak often of his first 40 years. Following his schooling in the North Midlands, he learned German by attending the exclusive international boarding school in St. Gallen, Switzerland: 'Institut auf dem Rosenberg'. He then received a Master of Arts in History at Oxford. During these studies, he became a follower of the concepts of the Belgian historian, Henri Pirenne, who was an early proponent of the idea that the new merchant class which evolved in European cities in the Middle Ages promoted wide-spread economic growth across the continent. In the mid 1930s, Wilde moved to the University of Munich to prepare for a PhD. While in Munich, he became fully proficient in German and other mainstream European languages. As well, he converted from his Church of England upbringing to Catholicism.

World War II interrupted his efforts to complete his thesis. At the outbreak, Wilde ignored the original call to escape from Germany. However, a few months later he decided to leave Munich with a Jewish student friend; in Italy, they learned that few boats to England were still operating from the continent. He left Italy via Monaco and crossed France to Bordeaux. Upon arriving in Bordeaux, Wilde and some newly-found British travel-mates rejected the option of riding to the U.K. with a cargo of claret barrels in 6 Welsh coal boats. A wise decision: the first night out from Bordeaux, all the coal boats were apparently sunk by German submarines.

The English desperadoes stole a high ranking German officer's staff car which was

temporarily parked while offices for the pending Vichy France government were scouted. Wilde told a few of his students that they drove south through the night to San Sebastián via Biarritz, and then made their way through Spain to Gibraltar. From there, they managed to secure berths on a British supply vessel by which they returned to England.

In 1949, Wilde became a professor of English at the École Supérieure de Commerce in Neuchâtel, which had a student population of 1,000. The École Supérieure, in many respects, continues today, as it did then, to fulfill the role of a Canadian Community College. Besides accommodating local students in its programs, including commercial accounting and modern languages, it especially attracted European and Middle Eastern students whose studies there would lead them to senior management positions, particularly when running their family enterprises in other countries. The University of Neuchâtel and the other educational institutions make Neuchâtel similar in atmosphere to Heidelberg.

From the late 1940s, Dr. Jean Grize, a retired Swiss Army Colonel, presided as the Directeur of the École Supérieure. He was a stern but compassionate administrator. He became Leonard Wilde's boss in 1949. Wilde developed a concept that a programme in Neuchâtel, teaching the last year of secondary school in English, could be recognized by all universities in North America. There would be the additional bonus of gaining some fluency in French by living with a local Swiss French-speaking family 'en pension'. He wanted no part in offering a year of "finishing school". He was granted a year's leave of absence to take a position at Culver Military Academy in Indiana for the academic year 1951-1952, from where he travelled to many states and discovered that there were 48 different educational systems in the USA. Obtaining credentials for graduates of a Swiss College in so many jurisdictions would be difficult.

In 1953, Dr. Grize granted Wilde a second leave of absence, which resulted in him accepting a year's posting for the 1954-1955 academic year as the senior English and History teacher at B.C.'s Shawnigan Lake School (now Canada's largest boarding school). He used the school breaks to visit California which he had identified as being a state with a vast number of wealthy families who might respond well to the idea of sending their child to school in Switzerland. Nevertheless, there were difficulties in gaining support by the State's Department of Education, to accept a diploma from an obscure college overseas.

His students at Shawnigan (and indeed in the first year of NJC) respectfully called him 'Mr. Wilde'. In early May 1955, one of them, the author of this article (Peter Hebb), urged Mr. Wilde that instead of soliciting Californians, the proposed college in Neuchâtel should have Canadian students. A meeting with the Hebb family in Vancouver, in August 1955, resulted in Mr. Hebb becoming the first student to enroll in Neuchâtel Junior College's opening year in September, 1956.

Dr. Grize had evidently entrusted Mr. Wilde to "make it happen" this time. On his way back to Switzerland, he was able to arrange for both the Ontario Department of Education and the University of McGill to offer their Grade 13 and McGill Senior School programmes (to grant university entrance standing) for all successful papers written abroad and passed. The final exam papers were to be sent to the University of Neuchâtel and then forwarded to Mr. Wilde to be written by the students at NJC. The papers would then be marked in Canada.

He wrote in early NJC promotional brochures that he had “spent two years in the United States and Canada studying the educational system in both countries (while) teaching in different schools.” As a result of his findings, it was decided to create the Junior College as a separate department within the École Supérieure. NJC’s courses would count as credits for students to enter Canadian Universities. Dr. Grize assisted in obtaining 3 classrooms and a staff office/common room on a rent-free basis at the Swiss Horological Research Laboratory on the campus of the University of Neuchâtel, just across the street from the École Supérieure. The labs at the École would be used by the Canadians. The majority of my fellow students in the founding class sailed on the Empress of Britain from Montreal on Tuesday, September 4th, 1956, and arrived in Liverpool on September 10th. NJC was underway.

Mr. Wilde often displayed his love of medieval history to the NJC student body. On a weekend coach trip in the first year, the student body was taken to visit the well preserved Roman amphitheatre at Avenches, about 30 km from the train station. En route, the coach stopped beside a green field, scarcely larger than a soccer pitch. Here, he explained that in 1476, Charles the Bold, the very powerful Duke of Burgundy, invaded Switzerland with an army on horseback. The Swiss Confederate infantry fought back with stakes in the ground and bows and arrows and scored a resounding victory, which historians say “changed military tactics in Europe”.

Throughout the preparatory year, while resuming his post of head of the English section in the École’s modern languages department, Mr. Wilde’s hectic job included soliciting applicants in Canada by mail and advertising, visiting schools and parents in the summer months, confirming acceptances, recruiting teachers, arranging transportation of students, staff, textbooks and baggage to Switzerland, negotiating *pensions* for 10 months, orienting new teachers and setting up visits of the school inspectors from Canada. In the first year, as the senior English professor at the École, he continued to teach one class there. As well, NJC’s major trips to Spain, Africa, Italy and the Alps, and weekend excursions to France, Germany and the Alps for skiing had to be planned, reserved and accompanied.

There were also the expected stresses of integrating the Canadians into the cultural life of Neuchâtel. These students, coming from different high school systems spread across 5000 km, had no unified perceptions of what to expect. They called themselves the “Guinea-Pigs”. Arriving on the first day at the station, they were greeted by cantonal and civic officials, and a 6-piece, all-male brass marching band clothed in blue uniforms with gold epaulettes. Mr. Wilde reassured the Canadians that Neuchâtel was not a Disney fairyland. In those days, hemlines were below the knees, and Canadian high school students often wore two-tone saddle shoes and white bobby socks. Swiss drivers slowed to stare at the bare knees displayed by Canadian students walking through the old town at weekends in Bermuda shorts. Although there were very few rules in NJC’s first year, Mr. Wilde succeeded in showing leadership as he persuaded the Canadians to conform to local customs. It was unlikely that the Swiss were going to conform to the ways of Canadian teenagers. New rules were made up over time throughout the year. The first-year students pioneered the phrase, still used today, that NJC was “The best year of our lives”.

To manage the office, Mr. Wilde had some part-time secretarial support and a financial bursar. The NJC faculty members were marvelous in responding to the needs of the students to learn and pass their exams. Some of the Swiss faculty, who also had positions at the École Supérieure, were able to travel with the students on overnight skiing adventures in the Alps. Wilde was meticulous in his planning of student trips. Coach travel was booked through the local Wittwer Company, and he used travel agents to reserve hotels and restaurants. Choosing the individual stops and what to visit was largely gleaned from careful study of the few reliable travel books then available. Hachette’s Guide Bleu was a primary source. An example of his creativity occurred in late November 1956. In early October, NJC compiled a list of students who wanted to buy new skis in Freiburg, Germany, where the post-war prices were considerably cheaper than in Switzerland. The plan was to leave Saturday morning for Freiburg, buy skis and stay overnight to enjoy German *gemütlichkeit*, then return to NJC by the same route on Sunday. Two weeks before our departure, Switzerland imposed a driving ban on all Sunday traffic, including coaches, that exceeded 50 km in distance. This ban, imposed because of the Suez Canal Crisis which impacted gasoline reserves within

Switzerland, was not copied by France and Germany. Mr. Wilde concocted a new, tortuous route that meant returning from Freiburg to Basel, crossing the River Rhine at Basel on a tiny ferry to France, then driving south in France to the city of Pontarlier before turning east to Neuchâtel. The distance within Switzerland, from the French border to the Wittwer garage, was exactly 49 km!

To assist in all of the logistics of the touring, the accommodation and the catering for two coaches full of students to places like Rome and Marrakesh, Mr. Wilde drew on the faculty and recruited older staff assistants to accompany the journeys. Two of these are noteworthy.

The first, Helmut Reith, a student born in Germany, was one of Mr. Wilde’s language students at the École Supérieure in 1956. In the first few weeks of NJC, he became a friend of Mr. Hebb, due to the street parties that accompanied the Fête des Vendanges. He soon knew most of the first year’s NJC students and gained the confidence of Mr. Wilde to help with the subsequent coach tours as well as the September orientation trips during the crossing of the Atlantic. Helmut was able to tell each new class what student life would be like. It followed that he joined the NJC Faculty as the German teacher.

The other staff assistant, who succeeded Helmut Reith, was a Canadian, Peter Welsh. A few of his reflections on working with Mr. Wilde are published at njc.ch/memoriesofwilde.

After two years, the Swiss officials perceived that NJC, with its Canadians, had been a unique success. New premises were found for the next few years in space owned by the City, and NJC was granted a permanent charter in December 1959 as a non-profit Foundation of the City. NJC now had its own independent board of directors and an annual subsidy from city taxes. The Swiss realized at that early stage that the visits by relatives and friends of the students would produce a wonderful stream of economic benefits to the local economy to offset the subsidies. A Canadian Advisory Council was established on a permanent basis in 1960 to advise the college, its Board and the Canadian office in Toronto. Neuchâtel Junior College had become a private school operated as a department of the Swiss public-school system.

Dr. Grize assumed the title of Rector of NJC, and Mr. Wilde became the Principal (*‘le directeur’*). In 1960, with assistance from the well-connected Swiss Board of Governors, Mr. Wilde was able to finance the purchase of an historic villa and gardens at Crêt-Taconnet 4, across the street from the Neuchâtel station. The villa became known as The Foyer; two out-buildings were built later on the grounds.

Mr. Wilde’s personal life was fairly private. He practiced his faith in the church but didn’t try to convert the students; the vast majority were mainly Protestants, and a few Jews. He didn’t have many local friends in Neuchâtel; NJC became his family. In his Munich days, he had a fiancé who died tragically while he was driving. He then stopped driving. Years later, he retook his license. It was a second driving tragedy on the road near Interlaken that took his life, and that of a student, in September 1965. He died as a bachelor of 53 survived by his sister in Belgium.

Leonard Wilde was sensitive, caring and, above all, a gifted teacher.

Peter H. Hebb, B.Com., F.T.I.

Retired Senior Executive in Vancouver

“NJC gave me the travel bug so I have visited over 60 countries in all continents, crossed the Atlantic both ways 60 times and been in Neuchâtel on 12 different trips. In June 2008, I was honoured to have been asked to present the Address at the NJC Graduation Ceremony, and also to present the Leonard Wilde Award to the outstanding qualifying student from 2007/8. I was also honoured to give the Toast to Leonard Wilde at the 60th Anniversary Gala in Toronto, October 2016.”

To read memories contributed by alumni Robert Blackburn ’61, Edward Borins ’61, Mary (A. Court) Downey ’61, and friend Peter Welsh, visit njc.ch/memoriesofwilde