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IDEAS

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with armcho



Women and children at the Spirit Lake internment camp in Quebec.

When Canadians were caged

A hundred years after the adoption of the War Measures Act, Lubomyr Luciuk looks back at the shameful internment of European Canadians during the First World War

LUBOMYR LUCIUK

Words matter. At first, Ottawa's words were calming. People were told that if they went about their business and caused no trouble they would be left alone, at peace.

Soon after, the War Measures Act was enacted. Its date of adoption was August 22, 1914 — a hundred years ago today.

Tens of thousands of immigrants, lured earlier to the Dominion with promises of free land and freedom, found themselves suddenly branded "enemy aliens," subject to arrest and other state-sanctioned indignities, not because of anything they had done wrong but only because of who they were, where they had come from.

Under armed guard, Ukrainians and other Europeans were caged behind Canadian barbed wire in 24 internment camps, there forced to do heavy labour for the profit of their jailers. In some cases, their womenfolk and children were sent away, too — to Spirit Lake in Quebec's Abitibi region and to Vernon, British Columbia.

The first survivor I met, in 1978, was Nick Sakaliuk. In 1912, he had left

Bukovyna, a western Ukrainian region then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, not wanting to soldier in the emperor's army. When the Great War broke out he was working at the Canadian Car and Foundry Company. Fired by a "patriotic" boss, Sakaliuk became destitute. Searching for work, he tried leaving for the United States, then a neutral power. Arrested, he was jailed at Montreal's federal immigration building, next sent to Kingston's Fort Henry, this country's first permanent internment camp.

He arrived there on October 17, 1914. Later relocated to the Petawawa camp, and then to Kapuskasing's, this "enemy alien" was finally paroled, ironically, for work in a munitions factory.

No teacher or professor ever spoke to me about Canada's first national internment operations. Instead it was this plain-hearted man who told me about what he and others like him endured.

In 1988, Mary Manko Haskett, another victim, recounted her story. She was Montreal-born, a British subject, six years old when imprisoned with her family at Spirit Lake. Her younger sister, Nellie, two years old, perished there. It was Mary who ennobled the

Ukrainian Canadian redress campaign by insisting it must be "about memory, not money." Mary wanted no compensation, never asked for any apology. All she wanted was for Canadians to remember what had been forgotten.

In the years following, Ottawa tried, at first, to tell us the internment operations never happened. When that didn't work, they instructed us to forget this past injustice and "move on." We often wondered why others raising historical grievances were never offered a similar prescription, not then, not since. But we did not falter. We stayed true to Mary's charge. And, in 2005, thanks to Inky Mark, a Chinese Canadian MP whose family members paid the Head Tax, we secured passage of Bill C-331 — The Internment of Persons of Ukrainian Origin Recognition Act.

That led to the creation of the Endowment Council of the Canadian First World War Internment Recognition Fund, an inclusive body charged with hallowing the memory of all of the First World War's "enemy aliens" through commemorative and educational initiatives. I take great satisfaction in recalling how two men working together, one of Chinese and the other of Ukrainian heritage, saw justice done, despite all the naysayers and thwarters. The country Inky and I share is one we are proud to be citizens of.

Today, one hundred years after passage of The War Measures Act — the same Act deployed in the Second World War against our fellow Japanese, Italian, and German Canadians, and against some Québécois in 1970 — over 100 plaques will be unveiled at 11 a.m. (local time) in over 60 cities, starting in Amherst, Nova Scotia then flowing west to Nain, N.W.T., a first-ever event in Canadian history. This national wave of remembrance, beginning and ending at internment camp sites, will sweep from coast to coast where a wave of repression once passed. These plaques fulfil Mary's dream.

Words do matter. I am glad I listened.

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