MOMENT IN TIME

JUNE 3, 1959

Filip Konowal as painted by the English artist Ambrose McEvoy after receiving the Victoria Cross for his bravery at the Battle of Hill 70 in France. BEAVERBROOK COLLECTION OF WAR ART/CANADIAN WAR MUSEUM

WAR HERO
FILIP KONOWAL DIES

Little was straightforward about Filip Konowal. At 5 foot 6, he didn't appear bound for war heroism, yet King George V, when presenting an award to him, said, "Your exploit is one of the most daring and heroic in the history of my army." Konowal, who came to Canada as a tree feller in 1913, considered himself Ukrainian, but because his birthplace was then part of Imperial Russia, he was viewed otherwise. That is why he was able to enlist in Canada's forces during the First World War, unlike other Ukrainians who were interned. For his bravery at the Battle of Hill 70 in France, where he single-handedly killed at least 16 enemies, he was awarded the Victoria Cross, a first for someone born outside the British Empire. Yet his postwar years were troubled. In 1919, he was drawn into a fight and killed a man. At his murder trial, his mental health saw him sent to an institution for recovery. Penniless upon release, he found work as a caretaker at the House of Commons. There, Prime Minister Mackenzie King came upon him washing floors. He had the former war hero assigned to clean the Prime Minister's Office, where he worked until 1959 when he died at 72. ALISON GZOWSKI