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Victoria Cross winner no longer an unsung hero

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KUTKIW, Ukraine - Hanna was plucking chickens when we arrived. She had heard rumours about Canadians coming. And one day a few slabs of concrete had appeared at the village crossroads. Could it be true that someone was going to honour the local boy turned British Empire war hero? Then I appeared on her doorstep -- at the same house in which her mother, Maria, once lived and her grandmother, Anna, starved to death. Anna was the first wife of Filip Konowal, the only Ukrainian Canadian ever to have won the Victoria Cross.

I had come to confirm the plans of Toronto's Branch 360 of The Royal Canadian Legion for a bronze sculpture and trilingual plaque commemorating Filip Konowal in Kutkiw, the family's native village. During the First World War battle for Hill 70, near Lens, France, Konowal fought with exceptional valour, successfully taking on a German machine gun nest single-handedly.

Hanna pulled my hands into hers, profusely thanking me for bringing this welcome news. As suddenly she released her grip, apologizing for the coarseness of her clasp. What she then said staggered me.

Three generations of Konowals had secreted a keepsake of Filip's. Out it came. Two American \$20 bills, of 1913 vintage. Both had been carefully folded over and over. Konowal had mailed them to his young wife and child just before the First World War and the 1917 Bolshevik coup severed him from them, forever.

Worthless today as currency, these bills represented a small fortune in the early decades of the last century. They could have more than paid for enough food to keep Anna and many of her fellow villagers alive through the 1932-1933 famine. But to possess foreign currency was a crime among the Soviets. They would have demanded that Anna explain why she had it. They would probably have accused her of being an agent of Western imperialism, a spy, an anti-Soviet Ukrainian nationalist. The entire family might have been liquidated. And, of course, the Communists weren't interested in Ukrainian lives being delivered. Stalin and his minions deliberately orchestrated a genocidal famine to crush Ukrainian resistance to Soviet rule. Millions perished, among them Anna.

When Filip Konowal emigrated in 1913, he joined others who came to Canada to earn enough for a better future for their loved ones in the old country. He must have worked very hard to save \$40 and get it home before war broke out in 1914. His separation from his family was meant to be temporary. Anna concealed the money that should have saved her and died slowly of hunger. Maria survived but also kept hidden her father's gift. She died in 1986.

But Filip, who had proven himself in the trench warfare of the Western Front, fell upon

hard times in Canada. His final years were spent as a janitor, cleaning Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King's offices on Parliament Hill. By then, considering himself cut off from his homeland forever, he remarried. His second wife was a French-Canadian widow, whose children he adopted as his own. But he never forgot he was a Ukrainian Canadian.

Filip Konowal died in Ottawa in 1959. Until 1996, his grave, not far from where Prime Minister Sir Wilfrid Laurier rests, in Notre Dame cemetery, was barely marked. Prodded into doing so, Veterans Affairs finally installed a proper marker, emblazoned with the Victoria Cross. Thanks to Branch 360, four memorial plaques have been unveiled across Canada, commemorating Konowal. Yet, oddly, federal officials have remained largely indifferent. Canada Post's Stamp Advisory Committee refused to issue a Konowal stamp. And the mendicants of the Canadian War Museum refuse to explain how Konowal's Victoria Cross was lost or stolen from their supposedly secure facility. More galling is that neither our Prime Minister nor any member of the cabinet agreed to participate in today's memorial service in Ukraine.

I visited Konowal's gravesite recently. Reuniting the family symbolically, I left a few stones from the limestone quarry where his father once worked and earth from his daughter's final resting place. Since his brave wife Anna's remains were dumped into a mass grave, site unknown, I brought no token from her save this story of her sacrifice. As I stood there I found myself thinking about how witless today's politicians are. Mouthing platitudes about Canadian unity is something they often do. Harvesting lessons about what it means to be a citizen of Canada from the often trying experiences of this immigrant, who served his adopted country with distinction, remains, however, a nation-forging duty that they have utterly failed to discharge.

A plaque commemorating Filip Konowal is being presented to Konowal's granddaughter, Claudette Wright of Orleans, in Ottawa today. At the same time, in Konowal's hometown of Kutkiw, a memorial will be unveiled marking the 83rd anniversary of the actions that won him the VC as a member of the Canadian Infantry.; Lubomyr Luciuk is a professor of political geography at Royal Military College of Canada.

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