

Plaques recognize Canada's dark past

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Master of Ceremonies Andrea Malysh of the Canadian First World War Internment Recognition Fund welcomes close to 50 people gathered for the unveiling of a plaque Friday morning at Vernon's Sutton Real Estate building.

To Andrea Malysh, her great grandfather was Wasyl Luchak.

To the Government of Canada, he was Prisoner of War #894, spirited for reasons unknown off the family farm in Hamlin, Alta. at the outset of the First World War in 1914 and moved to an experimental farm at Spirit Lake, Que., 300 miles north of Montreal.

Spirit Lake was one of the largest internment camps in Canada, holding more than 1,200 so-called enemy aliens, declared an enemy because of where their passports said they came from.

“We have no idea why he was taken off the farm,” said Malysh of Vernon, Friday, at the simultaneous unveiling of 100 plaques across Canada recalling Canada’s first national internment operations from 1914-1920.

Malysh, representing the Canadian First World War Internment Recognition Fund, served as master of ceremonies at Friday’s plaque unveiling ceremony at the Sunflower mural on the back of the Sutton Real Estate building.

It was one of 100 plaques unveiled at the same time across Canada (a plaque was also unveiled in Enderby at the Drill Hall), marking the 100th anniversary of the signing of the Canada War Measures Act.

“The acts is about human rights on its most fundamental level,” said Malysh, referring to the 8,579 mostly Ukrainians, Germans, Croatians, Polish, Bosnians, Czechs, Hungarians, Lithuanians, Serbians, Slovaks, Romanians, Bulgarians and Armenians who were loyal civilians of Canada, but deemed enemy aliens.

Friday’s ceremony was personal for Malysh.

“Our family came over in 1903 leaving an oppressed society to come to Canada and help open up the West with free land and farmers,” she said. “They were literally sideswiped by having to report (when the war broke out) because of the passport they came over with, which was Austro-Hungarian. It was not for anything they’d done, but they were forced to register as enemy aliens.”

More than 8,500 Ukrainians and other Europeans had to register on a monthly basis and get a card stamped on a monthly basis, paying \$2 per stamp, to prove they were not doing anything else other than farming, and not putting fear into the government.

One of the internment camps was set up in Vernon, where Seaton Secondary School is today.

The Vernon and District Family History Society discovered seven crumbling headstones in the northwest corner of the Pleasant Valley Cemetery, and, through research, discovered that seven graves belonged to people who died at the internment camp in Vernon.

North Okanagan-Shuswap MP Colin Mayes, Derek Hall, representing Vernon-Monashee MLA Eric Foster, and Vernon Mayor Rob Sawatzky helped Malysh unveil the plaque permanently entrenched in the wall of the Sutton building.

The four also laid commemorative wreaths at the base of the plaque.

“It is important for all Canadians to understand the full scope of our history, including its more difficult periods,” said Mayes. “The unveiling of these 100 commemorative plaques will remember and honour all victims of Canada’s first national internment operations.”

Rev. Richard D. Schulz of the Peace Lutheran Church and Very Reverend Roman Trynoha of Assumption St. Mary Ukrainian Orthodox Church, both in Vernon, blessed the plaque.

“May this memorial be a godsend, a constant reminder, a small symbol of justice, to all who view it, of the wrongs perpetrated against loyal citizens of Canada,” said Schulz. “Let it be a sign of our loving kindness and let it serve as a constant reminder to all future generations of the need to do justice for the victims of injustice.”

Close to 50 people attended the Vernon ceremony including Ukraine native Nick Petrykiw, 88, a member of St. Josaphat’s Ukrainian Catholic Church since arriving in Vernon in 1973 with his late wife, Katherine.

“Ukrainian history is filled with misery from invasions and something like this,” said Petrykiw. “You can’t get away from it. Today, is something special. It’s an honourable thing. I am going to keep these people in my mind and in my heart.”