

# A great injustice?

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<https://www.niagarathisweek.com/news-story/8447335--a-great-injustice-/>



*Mary Lapko holds a news article about her mother, who was one of the last survivors of First World War internment camps in Canada.*

A plaque marking the 100th anniversary of the implementation of the War Measures Act during the First World War and the internment of people of Eastern European descent will be unveiled Friday in front of St. John the Theologian Church on Lakeshore Rd. in St. Catharines.

The plaque is one of 100 English-French markers that will be unveiled at 11 a.m. in Ukrainian, Croatian, Serbian, German and Hungarian churches and cultural centres, moving from east to west across Canada.

"I think that it's important that we visit the past, not to live there, but to not repeat those mistakes. That was a great injustice," said Father Anton Szymachalski, parish priest at St. John. "To judge people based on race colour or creed in a society that claims to be progressive or tolerant, it's just not acceptable."

At the start of the war, in August 1914, the Canadian government quickly enacted the War Measures Act, which gave it sweeping powers to suspend or limit civil liberties.

What resulted was the incarceration from 1914-1920 of thousands people.

Internees had much of their wealth confiscated, although most were paid 25 cents a day, far less than that offered to labourers of the time period. They were also “disenfranchised,” which meant loss of standing and right to vote during the course of the war.

The majority of those interned were of Ukrainian descent, targeted because Ukraine was then split between Russia and the Austro-Hungarian Empire, an enemy of the British Empire.

Under the authority of the act, Canada interned 8,579 people in 24 receiving stations and internment camps from 1914-1920.

One of the internment camps was at the Armoury in Niagara Falls.

Szymachalski said that in partnership with the Congress of Ukrainian Canadians, family members of detainees and members of the affected ethnic groups as well as anyone who feels this is an important human rights issue have been invited to the unveiling of the plaque.

“We need to revisit the past to learn, not to dwell on, but to learn and try and make a better future,” he said.

Niagara Falls resident Mary Lapko remembers her mother and grandparents who were interned at the Spirit Lake camp in Quebec.

Her mother, Stefania Milniczuk Pawliw, was one of the last survivors of the interment camps when she died in 2003 at the age of 88. Pawliw as a child can be seen on a commemorative stamp that was issued in 2000.

Lapko’s grandfather, Ignace Mielniczuk, was employed by Canadian Pacific Railway and her grandmother worked at the Molson brewery in Montreal. But because they held Austro-Hungarian passports, they were sent to the camp, losing all that they had worked for.

“Everything was confiscated from them, everything was taken away,” said Lapko.

After five years and the end of the war, the family was released but had become so embittered by the experience they left Canada for Ukraine.

Her mother, Stefania, who had Canadian citizenship, returned to Canada just before the start of the Second World War.

“My mother never talked much about it,” Lapko said. “Because it was too painful for them.”

“The plaque is a memory for those people, because a lot of people in Canada don’t know about it. They say there’s never been such a thing in Canada,” she said.

The unveiling ceremony will involve a plaque on a rock that would be symbolic of northern Ontario where some of the first internees were sent. The dedication will be followed by a short blessing and a moment of silence for those interred.

More information can be found at [www.internmentcanada.ca](http://www.internmentcanada.ca)

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