

Plaques commemorate Canada's lesser-known internment camps

By BRIAN PLATT, Staff Reporter, The Toronto Star
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A priest lights incense before a small plaque on a wall in a downtown Toronto cathedral and sings a Ukrainian Orthodox hymn.

It's a small ceremony to commemorate the internment of "enemy aliens" during the First World War: people living in Canada who happened to have come from countries that were now at war with this country.



The Very Rev. Archpriest Dr. Jaroslaw S. Buciora blesses a plaque to commemorate people put in internment camps during WWI at the Ukrainian Orthodox Church in Toronto. (BERNARD WEIL / TORONTO STAR)

The plaque in St. Volodymyr Ukrainian Orthodox Cathedral, on Bathurst St., will be joined by 100 more across Canada in Ukrainian, German, Hungarian, Serbian, Croatian and Armenian cultural and religious centres.

These were the [people targeted when Canada's War Measures Act was adopted](#) on Aug. 22, 1914.

“May we never allow this to happen again,” said Peter Bayrachny, the cathedral’s president, as the ceremony wrapped up.

About 8,500 people were interned in Canada between 1914 and 1920. They were sent to 24 camps in places like Amherst, N.S., and Banff, Alta. Nearly half of the internees were Ukrainian.

One of them was Nicholas Szady, who had the misfortune of immigrating to Canada from an area within what was then the Austro-Hungarian Empire (in what is now western Ukraine.)

“He came here to escape the empire,” said Szady’s grandson Ted Sosiak, who was at the ceremony. “They said that if they didn’t intern him he might go fight for the empire, which is nutty.”

Sosiak, a family physician, never met his grandfather, but knows the story through his mother. Szady, a farmer, was sent to the Fort Henry camp in Kingston, Ont., then assigned to work at the Canada Cement Plant in Belleville.

“The whole thing was about exploitation of cheap labour,” Sosiak said.

The goal of the plaque campaign is to simply make people aware of this part of Canadian history, which has been overshadowed by the [Japanese-Canadian internments](#) during the Second World War.

The project’s funding comes from the [Canadian First World War Internment Recognition Fund](#), which was endowed with \$10 million from the federal government in 2008, as well as the [Ukrainian Canadian Civil Liberties Foundation](#).

Ryan Boyko, a UCCLF board member, said the project was born last summer, during an annual meeting in Banff. The Alberta flooding had stranded them for an extra few days and their talks soon turned to the 100-year anniversary.

“There are all these different Ukrainian and other groups across the country, and we wondered, what can we do that brings everybody together?” Boyko said. “We considered a few events, but we wanted something that would be permanent.”

He said they take their inspiration from Mary Manko Haskett, the last known survivor of the First World War internment camps. “She said she didn’t want money. She didn’t want an apology. What she wanted was for people to remember this.”

Sosiak said that even despite the stories from his mother, he didn’t fully appreciate the issue until reading a book on the subject by Lubomyr Luciuk, a history professor at the Royal Military College of Canada.

Sosiak said his mother had sometimes talked about it as a “source of embarrassment for the family, as if we had we done something wrong.”

“My grandfather came because they were pitching Canada as the place of hope for everybody,” he said. “Now there’s a scar there.”