

First World War detainment of civilians commemorated in Oshawa

Ukrainian community unveils plaque at Oshawa City Hall

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<https://www.durhamregion.com/news-story/4799021-first-world-war-detainment-of-civilians-commemorated-in-oshawa/>



OSHAWA -- Oshawa Mayor John Henry, left, and Walter Kish, president of the Ukrainian Canadian Congress Oshawa Branch, unveiled a plaque at Oshawa City Hall to commemorate the 100th anniversary of Canada's internment operations. Durham MP Erin O'Toole looked on. The operations saw 8,000 Ukrainian and other European Canadians kept in 24 camps between 1914 and 1920 across Canada under the 1917 War Time Elections Act. The plaque was one of 100 unveiled across Canada on this date. August 22, 2014 - Celia Klemenz / Metroland

OSHAWA -- As Canadians reflect on the 100th anniversary of the outbreak of the First World War, communities across the country, including Oshawa, are recognizing the detainment of thousands of civilians during the country's first internment operation in 1914.

Officials in Oshawa joined members of the Ukrainian community in unveiling a plaque at Oshawa City Hall on Aug. 22. Oshawa's was one of 100 such unveilings on that day.

"There's a large Ukrainian population in the greater Oshawa area; according to the last census we have 16,000 Canadians of Ukrainian descent, and the Ukrainians were the most affected by the internment, but they weren't the only ones," said Walter Kish, president of the Canadian Ukrainian Congress's Oshawa branch.

Internment operations began in August 1914 and continued until June 1920, two years after the end of the war.

Of the 8,579 people held in camps, 3,000 were prisoners of war, but the rest were civilian men, women and children. Ukrainians made up the largest ethnic group of those detained. Detainees also included Czechs, Hungarians, Romanians, Serbians and Slovaks who had papers identifying themselves as citizens of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The prisoners included citizens of the Ottoman Turkish Empire, such as Armenians, Alevi Kurds and others.

Many had their assets confiscated upon their arrest and not all of it was returned. They were obliged to do heavy labour under armed guard.

Most of the women and children were held at two camps located in Vernon, British Columbia and Spirit Lake near Amos in Quebec.

Mr. Kish is from northern Quebec and as a child knew of some of the families who had members who had been imprisoned.

"As a child I had heard there had been an internment camp and people had been in prison there and in fact died there," he said.

He applauded Oshawa for placing the plaque in the public foyer in City Hall. He said many of the 100 plaques were placed in Ukrainian community centres and churches.

"Not a large number were in public places like City Hall which is unfortunate ... Ukrainians all know about it, but it's important non-Ukrainian ethnic groups and Canadians in general know this took place and this isn't swept under the rug," he said.

In fact, Mr. Kish said Canada's recognition of the internment shows that the country is a global leader.

"As well as a commemoration of an injustice, it's also a celebration of the fact that Canada has a mature enough democracy to recognize past injustices," he said. "It is able to recognize past wrongs and improve on it and put in place things that would prevent injustices like this happening in the future."

That's especially important given the current situation in Ukraine with respect to Russian aggression, said Mr. Kish.

"They obviously haven't learned the lessons in the past," he said.

The plaque unveiling was attended by local MPs Colin Carrie and Erin O'Toole, MPP Jennifer French, Mayor John Henry and members of Oshawa council.

A local Ukrainian priest shared a blessing and a soloist sang a Ukrainian version of Leonard Cohen's song Hallelujah, which has become an anthem for protest demonstrations in Ukraine.