

THE PLAQUE ON THE STONE: NIAGARA SERBS REMEMBER THE INTERNMENT

Nikola Yerich of Niagara Falls was one of approximately 9,000 East Europeans arrested and sent to internment camps across Canada during the First World War. Thousands of early immigrants to Canada came with Austro-Hungarian passports as citizens of that Empire. Some 80,000 Ukrainians, Serbs, Romanians and other ethnic groups were presumed sympathizers of the enemy Empire, labelled “enemy aliens” and lost their property, civil rights and freedom; forced to endure humiliation, injustice and oppression; and subjected to internment.

While this sad episode in Canadian history is still generally unknown, the victims of Canada’s First National Internment Operations were remembered on August 22, 2014 when 100 plaques were unveiled at 11 a.m. local time beginning in Nova Scotia and progressing across Canada to British Columbia. This wave of remembrance, called “Project CTO”, was a nationwide effort to raise public awareness of the first internment operations in Canada authorized by the implementation of the War Measures Act precisely 100 years ago on that date.

Plaque unveilings took place in two Serbian communities: the Serbian Heritage Museum in Windsor and the St. George and St. Archangel Michael Church in Niagara Falls. The program in Niagara began with the Canadian National Anthem followed by greetings from Denise Mirovic-Mateyk, president of the St. George and St. Archangel Michael Church; Aca Pantelic, president of the Srpska Narodna Odbrana u Kanadi (Serbian National Shield Society of Canada) which played an important role in liberating Serbs from the Kapuskasing camp; George Yerich Sr., internee descendant; Father Dejan Obradovic, Mayor Jim Diodati and MPP Wayne Gates. Each echoed that we must remember this period in our history and honour the memory of those unjustly interned in Canada.



Rev. Dejan Obradovic leading a memorial for the internees.

The plaque which is affixed to a stone near the church entrance was unveiled by Aca Pantelic on behalf of the Srpska Narodna Odbrana and George Yerich Sr., a descendant of internee Nikola Yerich, who expressed personal gratitude to the organizers for bringing to light this long forgotten and painful period in Canadian history. Father Dejan Obradovic held a solemn memorial service for the internees and prayed for all who suffered during WWI, reminding us that as Christians we must never forget those who sacrificed for us. He invited everyone to the church hall to learn about Canada’s First National Internment Operations and to partake of refreshments, Lenten desserts, and fruit.



George Yerich Sr. places a wreath on the grave of his great uncle Nikola Yerich, internee.

John Mrmak delivered two power point presentations prepared by Draga Dragasevic and Dr. Marinel Mandres which he supplemented with an informative display of pictures and documents pertaining to this painful episode. Among them he posted letters from Ambassador Mihailo Papazoglu, Serbia’s Ambassador to Canada, and Olga Markovich whose father Bozidar, on behalf of the Srpska Narodna Odbrana, facilitated the liberation of Serbs from the Kapuskasing camp.

John discussed the situation in Canada prior to 1914 and the need to develop Canada’s vast frontiers and natural resources. Immigrants were invited with the promise of free land, work, good wages and freedom. The pain of emigrating from their homelands paled in comparison to the horrific experiences they endured in Canada when war was declared and their hopes were dashed. Overnight these immigrants were labelled “enemy aliens” who had to be “dealt with”. Twenty-four internment camps were set up for them and there is

mounting evidence that Serbs were in most of them. From the Niagara area, Serbs were sent to Kapuskasing, while many Ukrainians first went to Fort Henry in Kingston.

The little we know about the Serbian experience in the camps comes from Ukrainian Canadian research and now we have Dr. Marinel Mandres, a professor at Wilfrid Laurier University, who received a grant from the Endowment Council of the Canadian First World War Internment Recognition Fund to research details about the Serbian and Romanian internment.

With support from the Srpska Narodna Odbrana and the tireless work of Bozidar Markovich many Serbs were spared im-

prisonment and Serbs interned in the Kapuskasing camp were released in 1919. John delineated the important role that the Odbrana played during both World Wars providing humanitarian and financial aid, sending aid to Serbian orphans, co-ordinating medical support.

Nikola Yerich was apprehended in Welland, interned in Kapuskasing in December 1914, paroled in 1916 and sent back to Welland to work on the building of the



Welland Canal. By 1916 Canada was very short of labourers since thousands of men were in Europe fighting. Nikola and nearly 80,000 other immigrants had to report to the police or the RCMP every month to have their parole slip signed. Such was the life of “enemy aliens”. Nikola became a member of the Srpska Narodna Odbrana when it was organized in 1916 and was elected secretary of the local Welland Branch.

The intolerance toward these immigrants was a direct result of an attitude of ignorance and prejudice inspired by the Canadian government’s passage of the War Measures Act on August 22, 1914 giving authorities unlimited power to confiscate property, detain individuals, and send them to work camps “without just cause” simply because of where they had come from and not anything they had done. This Act came into effect two more times in Canadian history.

The wartime dichotomous situation of the Serbs was unique: those from Austria-Hungary were treated as “enemy aliens”; those from Serbia were treated as allies. In the case of Nikola Yerich, while he was imprisoned as an “enemy alien” his nephew Milan was a volunteer on the Salonika Front. Milan endured life in the trenches and died near Niš, Serbia only months before war’s end as his units were driving the enemy out of Serbia in 1918.

Today’s Canada is not the same as the Canada of 1914. The many positive changes were not “without a price”. When we look at this memorial plaque unveiled on August 22, 2014, on the centennial of the implementation of the War Measures Act, we need to recall Pierre Trudeau’s words: that a “just society” is one in which the rights of minorities will be safe from the whims of intolerant majorities. Canada of 1914 was certainly not a “just society” relative to these immigrants who lost their youth, health, property and lives in the internment camps. There are many lessons in this tragic episode.

This historic day would not have happened in our Serbian community if it were not for many supporters. Thanks goes to our Serbian Church School organization in Niagara Falls headed by Denise Mirovic-Mateyk, priest Father Dejan, the Serbian Sisters led by Lil Mirovic, the Srpska Narodna Odbrana and its president Aca Pantelic, Dr. Marinel Mandres and Draga Dragasevic. Finally, a debt of gratitude goes to: the Ukrainian Canadian Civil Liberties Foundation for the Project CTO initiative, the Canadian First World War Internment Recognition Fund for donating the plaque, the Queenston Quarry for donating the stone to support the plaque, George and Violet Yerich and family for their encourage-

ment and financial help to affix the plaque and for the lovely wreath which was then placed at the headstone of Nikola Yerich a few days later.

In the audience of about 100 people there were seven university history majors, two of whom teach high school history courses. They were very interested in the displays from World War I seeing, perhaps for the first time, pictures from the Serbian perspective and from the Salonika Front where Serbs participated in the greatest numbers. Among the attendees there were at least a dozen immigrants who came here after spending many months or years during WWII in refugee or labour camps in Italy and Germany. They were deeply moved as they listened to the description of the life of the internees, a life that sounded so familiar to them. Many said that their arrival to Canada was also not so eagerly received by Canadians and even by some Serbs. The label of DP (displaced person) took a long time to erase. They, too, worked under extreme conditions in mines, forests and construction for little money, but no one regretted coming to Canada. To the contrary, they all became Canadian citizens as soon as they qualified and agreed that Canada is a vastly different country now and events such as Project CTO are welcome catalysts for remembrance and tribute.

John Mrmak