

Slave Labour, in Unthinkable Conditions

Address delivered by the Hon. Jason Kenney, Minister of Employment and Social Development and Minister for Multiculturalism at the Opening Ceremony of the National Internment Exhibit at Cave and Basin National Historic Site, Banff, AB on September 13, 2013.

Dobray Den, na vsa dobra; Dobar dan.

Good afternoon, Bonjour.

Your Grace, Your Excellency, Reverend Fathers.

Member of Parliament, James Bezan, Senator Tannas,

Your Worship, Fellow Canadians, Dear Friends.

As we look around us and see a place of unspeakable beauty and yet we know that this site is also one of unspeakable sadness.

Today we realize the sacred duty what the great chronicler of the Holocaust, Elie Wiesel said was the most sacred duty that echoes down to us from the bible, the moral duty to remember. "To remember the good of which we have been blessed and the evil that we have suffered." Today and in this place, in perpetuity, we remember those thousands of innocent new Canadian citizens, subjects who made this their new land expecting a future of freedom, prosperity and opportunity. Men and women, many of whom came from Eastern and Central Europe who grew up perhaps experiencing tyranny and persecution and certainly in most cases material deprivation. But who heard, perhaps in their small villages in Galicia, in the Balkans, throughout Central and Eastern Europe about a land of opportunity across the great ocean. And like those figures in the paintings of the Great Canadian Ukrainian artist William Kurelek, they left all that was familiar behind with great bravery and courage to set out across the Atlantic. They arrived, most of them in Halifax and Montreal, disembarked and then for day after day took the train west, settling in Northern Quebec, and Toronto and Northern Ontario and of course, plowing virgin soil here in the newest part of the new world in Western Canada. They helped to build a civilization, through their hard work, through their depth of character, through their integrity, through their fidelity, fidelity to the traditions and the faith of their ancestors. Yes, they were men and women and children proudly of Ukrainian origin, of Croatian origin, of Austrian and Hungarian origin of many different ethnic origins, of many different mother tongues, of many different expressions of their Christian faith, and yet, all of them, even those who came without the blessings of much education or material wealth, quickly became proud Canadians. And we know that, we know that because when war broke out in 1914 tens of thousands of the sons and daughters of Ukraine, of the other nationalities of the other Austro-Hungarian Empire, demonstrated their loyalty and their patriotism by enlisting with the armed forces of their Canadian King, and the Canadian Army to fight alongside Canadians of all backgrounds in the battlefields in Europe, and many of them returned to Europe never made their way home. We know the stories of the son of Ukraine in Canada who went on to win the Victory Cross for exemplary valour. And so there can be no doubt that these brave, tough, rugged, men and women were devoted to their new country.

Today we call to mind their sacred memory as we recall with sadness and some shame what befell them during the First World War internment operations. Beginning in 1915 more than 8,000 of these sons and daughters of Europe, proud Canadians all, were arrested, detained and transported to one of 23 internment camps like this, from Spirit Lake in Quebec to this natural cathedral in Banff. There they were put to work in what today would only be described as slave labour, in unthinkable conditions, without contact with their families, with their communications being monitored and censored. They were treated quite literally as enemy aliens. Some tragically even died in these places of internment. And all of them undoubtedly felt a sense of betrayal that this land of opportunity which drew them somehow turned into an internment camp for them. But the greatness of Canada is that, while we are never perfect we always strive to broaden our protection for the inalienable dignity of the human person. We recognize when we have made mistakes in our history that is what we are doing here today. That is what the government of Canada on your behalf has done in cooperation with the affected communities in establishing these places of permanent memory, to transmit to future

generations the collective memory of what happened in these places. Yes, to discharge our sacred memory to remember but also to ensure that we learn these lessons. That future generations, will not be tempted by xenophobia, by prejudice into treating fellow Canadians as enemy aliens.

I want to especially thank those members of the affected communities for having revived the memory of what happened here. Because the memory was almost willfully forgotten, of course those who created these camps, those who put these proud Canadians to forced labour here at Cave and Basin and at more than 20 other camps across the country wanted to forget this period in our history. And so too did the internees, to add shame on shame many of them had come back to their homes after the war, and let us not forget, that many of these places kept internees until 18 months following the armistice of November of 1918. If there was any evidence of bad faith and injustice, in this policy of internment, that is it. Then when they returned home simply wanted to put it behind them. And I know amongst many of you, parents and grandparents, who were interned in these places, but who did not want to tell the stories. And so it was lost in history, until some stubborn and inventive Canadians historians began to recover the story of the First World War internment operations. Professor Lubomyr Luciuk and others who uncovered this story and began to talk to the remaining internees who were still with us 15 and 20 years ago, and we recreated this history. And the affected communities, the Ukrainian community in the lead, supporter by other Eastern and Central European Canadian cultural communities came to their government to say, collectively we must remember. And that is precisely what we have done, through the Community Historical Recognition Program and this National Historical Recognition program.

So, thank you for refusing to forget, thank you for insisting on remembering and learning from this tragic injustice, that is a mark on the dignified history of this great democracy.

Friends, let us say, although they are no longer with us, Let us say prayfully, let us say through these acts of recognition, let us say to the internees, that there was no reason for them to be ashamed that they, yes, were proud sons and daughters of Europe, of Ukraine, of those other cultural backgrounds but they too, were proud daughters and sons of Canada. Today we honor their memory, their sacrifice, their devotion to this country. We look back with deep regret on a policy that never should have been implemented. Let me make one more substantive point. In times of conflict and warfare it is understandable that there are elevated concerns about national security but do not allow historians today to whitewash what happened between 1915 and 1920 at Cave and Basin and at the other sites. The historical record is clear that the Imperial Government in London specifically told the Canadian authorities during the First World War that there was no reason to treat the so-called subjects of Austro-Hungary as enemy aliens, that they did not pose a security risk. And so this was a policy designed, conceived and executed - I believe the historical records shows - in bad faith. But today, we seek symbolically to correct that bad faith through an act of faith, through an act of collective memory.

In a blessed falling asleep let us grant them O Lord eternal rest unto thy departed servants and make their memory to be eternal. Amen.