

Remarks of Prof. Bohdan Kordan, Prairie Centre for the Study of Ukrainian Heritage, St. Thomas More College, University of Saskatchewan at the official unveiling of the Eaton Internment Memorial Plaque, Hawker, Saskatchewan, 28 October 2014, 11:00 am.

FOR RELEASE ON DELIVERY

On a February day, some 96 years ago on this very site something unusual happened. A train pulled into the siding – Eaton as it was then known – and off-loaded its human cargo. It was a small group – sixty-five men in total – who had been relocated from Munson, Alberta, a railway junction down the line where earlier they had escaped the harrowing experience of the 1918 Spanish Influenza and a train wreck that nearly claimed their lives. Having arrived at this new destination and under the watchful eye of a small detachment of Canadian soldiers, they surveyed their new surroundings. Looking out over the open prairie horizon, they no doubt asked: What am I am doing here? Why is this happening to me?

And we remember.

These were men recently arrived to this land, invited by the promise of opportunity. They were neighbours, yet strangers. In some ways they were familiar, yet unfamiliar, speaking a foreign tongue with customs and habits not easily shared. In 1914, as recent immigrants from Austria-Hungary and Germany, lands now at war with Canada, they would be designated aliens of enemy origin.

And we remember.

The war years were difficult for the country as a whole. But at the start, when the future remained uncertain, the question of what to do with aliens of enemy origin became paramount. Their foreign appearance and demeanour gave rise to suspicion and doubt. That they were unemployed and in need simply underscored the point that something need to be done. In the context of war and emergency measures they would be interned as prisoners of war in one of the twenty-four specially created camps located across the country.

And we remember.

They came from cities and towns, villages and hamlets: Winnipeg and Calgary, Regina and Saskatoon, Brandon and Vegreville, Nanaimo, Yorkton, Melville, Ladysmith and Estevan. In total 8,579 souls would be taken from their families and homes. Another 85,000 reported weekly to local magistrates, policemen or other officials, all of whom would pass judgment over their lives and freedom.

And we remember.

In the camps, at the point of a bayonet, they would be forced to work. In Banff, Jasper, and Revelstoke, they cleared bush and built roads. At Eaton they repaired and laid new track. Ukrainian and German, Pole and Croat, Serb and Turk—they were of different nationalities. They were young and old. Some were married; others were not. Some had children; others did not. A few had parents, others simply had no one to write to of their misery and despair.

And we remember.

At the time, duty-bound, those who authorised their internment and oversaw their plight felt there was nothing wrong with that. Neighbours witnessed the disappearance of neighbours and thought there was nothing wrong with that. Nothing was said when enemy aliens were arrested and paraded through the streets because it was felt there was nothing wrong with that. Sadly, in turning away, they also believed there was nothing wrong with that.

And we remember.

As we unveil this plaque, we remember the trials of those who were brought here to Eaton and in their desperation sought to escape. We remember too the many thousands, who having been similarly interned elsewhere would return to their families and their homes, picking up the pieces of their broken lives, pondering over the experience and failed promises. We remember their pain, suffering and despair.

Gathered here today, standing before this monument, we remember the events past. We gather here not to engage in recrimination or blame, nor to stoke the fires of resentment. Rather we remember these events as an act of reconciliation, declaring openly that a wrong was committed and an injustice had taken place here.

We unveil this plaque today as an act of political faith, stating unequivocally that the events past will not be repeated and to alert current governments of their role and responsibility in moments of crises. We unveil this plaque as a testament – to proclaim that we are a nation governed by laws and as a people we are aware of the obligation we owe to each other – to be tolerant, understanding and caring. But we also unveil this plaque today as a legacy, so that future generations may remember the importance of preserving rights and liberties because in doing so they not only protect the freedom of others but their own as well.

Vichnaya pamiat.