

CANADIAN FIRST WORLD WAR INTERNMENT RECOGNITION FUND

Address delivered by Ivan T. Grbesic, Chair of the Endowment Council of the Canadian First World War Internment Recognition Fund at the Vernon Pleasant Valley Cemetery Internee Remembrance Ceremony on Saturday, May 23, 2015.

Good morning ladies and gentlemen,

Bonjour mesdames et monsieurs,

Dobar dan, dame i gospodo.

What a beautiful day for such a solemn occasion. While we are honoured to have had in attendance with us today Minister Jason Kenney, it is also great to see and to be able to greet such a large number of elected officials, and members of the clergy, who are here today.

Ladies and gentlemen, I would first like to thank the Vernon & District History Society for organizing this event, which relates to the historic injustice that was committed during Canada's first national internment operations, a tragic yet little known chapter in our Canadian history. Internment impacted 8,579 so called "enemy aliens" - Ukrainians, Alevi Kurds, Armenians, Bulgarians, Croatians, Czechs, Germans, Hungarians, Italians, Jews, Ottoman Turks, Polish, Romanians, Russians, Serbians, Slovaks, and Slovenes, among others of which most were Ukrainians and most were civilians.

These men, women and children were interned in 24 internment camps across Canada, a third of which were in British Columbia and were used as forced labourers to build up their infrastructure. The Vernon Internment Camp was the permanent provincial internment camp; the longest in operation, the second last camp to close 18 months following Armistice. These so-called "enemy aliens" built Hwy 97A at Mara Lake, opening up the Okanagan to the Trans Canada Hwy and the Okanagan to the Kootenays creating Hwy 6 between Cherryville and Edgewood.

The War Measures Act was implemented 100 years ago and its effects have had a "crippling legacy." These people were interned not because of any wrongdoing, but because of who they were and where they came from.

In total, 107 died by illnesses like TB or Influenza and a number were shot trying to escape. 106 were deemed insane by what was coined, "the barbed wire decease."

One of the gravest forms of injustice is when victims cannot tell their story, when they are silenced by denial or indifference, when they are marginalized and pushed to the periphery of history. Today, we remember the Croatian, Serbian, Ukrainian, and German men who died at the Vernon Internment Camp.

The reconsecration of the Vernon internee graves represents an important milestone in remembering, commemorating and in recognizing this historic injustice suffered by thousands of innocent people.

In closing, we honor those buried here - Mile Hećimović, Ivan Jugo, Timoti Korejczuk, Stipan Šapina, Wasyl Shapka, Jure Vukorepa, Samuel Vulović as well as Bernard Heiny, Karl Keck, Leo Mueller, and Wilhem Wolter - with the words of internee, Joseph Leskiw, who wrote to the Banff Internment camp officials on December 24, 1915:

“So I beg you...do not forget me.”

May they rest in peace – slava im.

Ivan Grbesic
Vernon, 23May 2015