

Dark chapter of Cape Breton history illuminated

by Ken MacLeod - Cape Breton Post, 21 September 2012

WHITNEY PIER — While the tragic tale of Canadian citizens imprisoned because of their ethnicity during the Second World War has been popularized over the years through films, television programs and novels, an earlier and equally shameful chapter in the nation's history has been largely forgotten.

These days, even Whitney Pier's proud and tightly knit Ukrainian community is mostly unaware that their forefathers were persecuted by the Canadian government during the First World War and forced to live either in internment camps on mainland Nova Scotia or to continue to work at the nearby steel plant under a tight watch that required them to report weekly to local police.

The first steps to shining a light on this dark chapter in the island's history will be made when the public is invited to witness the unveiling of a plaque at Holy Ghost Ukrainian Catholic Church, 49 West St., Sydney, on Friday, at 11 a.m. The plaque honours Cape Bretoners of Ukrainian descent who were interned from 1914 to 1920 by the Canadian government.

Making his first visit to Cape Breton to take part in the ceremony is Lubomyr Luciuk, a professor of political geography at the Royal Military College in Kingston, Ont. As one of the guiding lights of the Ukrainian Canadian Civil Liberties Association, Luciuk has led the fight by the Ukrainian-Canadian community to have the Canadian government acknowledge what happened to Ukrainians and other east Europeans during Canada's first national internment operations of 1914-1920. The campaign took some 20 years to gain traction with the general public, but success was finally realized with the signing of a technical document in 2008 that established a \$10-million endowment within the Ukrainian Canadian Foundation of Taras Shevchenko.

The interest accruing on that principal is now being used for commemorative and educational programs dealing with the wartime experiences of communities like Whitney Pier. Luciuk was appointed as a member of the endowment council of the Canadian First World War Internment Recognition Fund by UCCLA.

When Canada entered the First World War in August of 1914 as part of the British Empire, it passed a piece of legislation known as the War Measures Act. Under that legislation, anyone living in Canada at the time who came from enemy countries — the Ottoman-Turkish empire, the German empire and, more important so far as Ukrainian-Canadians were concerned, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, which

included the western part of the Ukraine — was suddenly brought to the attention of the Canadian government.

“War breaks out, and these people are of Ukrainian ethnicity, but their papers, their citizenship, technically lists them as Austro-Hungarians,” said Luciuk. “So Canada, as part of the British Empire, suddenly realizes that within our country’s borders we have hundreds of thousands of people who are ‘enemy aliens.’”

At first, the Canadian government was content to simply register these people and, so long as they went about their business, caused no problems and clearly weren’t a security threat, they were left alone. But in a very short time, war hysteria reared its ugly head and pre-existing prejudices against east Europeans, widespread in the day, encouraged the government to move quickly to set up an internment program.

“Twenty-four camps were set up across the country,” said Luciuk. “In the Maritimes, the most famous camp was at the Citadel in Halifax, but there was also a camp at Amherst.”

While not a great deal is known about the Nova Scotia camps today, the Cumberland County Museum and Archives in Amherst has set up a permanent display on the subject.

“The men in camps would make artifacts from wood and sell them to the townspeople,” said museum manager and curator Diane Shaw. “Over the years, the townspeople have returned these artifacts to us and we’ve included them in a display we have of the internment camps in our museum. They also wrote plays and staged them in the camps.”

“People in Amherst still remember the work camp. The older generation may be gone, but they passed the memories down to the younger generations. And for those who don’t remember, we have an educational process. That’s what museums are about, telling people about what happened in the past because a lot of times that can affect what happens in the future.”

In all, about 8,500 people were interned in 24 work camps spread all cross the country, mostly in remote areas where the men worked in mining and forestry under generally harsh conditions, with another 80,000 registered as aliens and required to report regularly to the authorities. Only about 3,000 people in the works camps were genuine German or Austrian-German prisoners of war, with the remainder designated as civilian internees and categorized as second-class prisoners of war. While entire families were often sent to the camps in British Columbia and Quebec, only men were sent to the two Nova Scotian camps, with their families left at home to make ends meet as best they could.

“The men were forced to work under some pretty trying conditions for the profit of their jailers,” said Luciuk, “which was contrary to international law at the time.”

Most of the records for the camps were lost or destroyed at the end of the war, so it's not known today how many Cape Bretoners were sent to work camps and how many were allowed to register with police and keep working at the steel plant in Sydney. Sydney resident Peter Mombourquette is the editor of a book published earlier this year by Holy Ghost Ukrainian Catholic Church to celebrate its 100th anniversary. The book contains a short chapter called “The Camps” that deals with the wartime internment from a Cape Breton perspective.

Mombourquette's wife is of Ukrainian descent, he was married in the church and his children were baptized, married and served mass there. He feels the ceremony Friday will open the eyes of many Cape Bretoners, whether they are of Ukrainian descent or not, to a situation that at the time caused a great deal of hardship and fostered plenty of resentment within the local Ukrainian community.

“I think this will be good for the local community,” he said. “Very few people know about this; our parish priest knows about it and some of the elders as well, but most of our parishioners didn't even know it happened, until now. But now that more information is

coming out from across the country, the story is finally being told.”

Though reliable records are practically nonexistent, there are reports that show that most of the Ukrainian-Canadian men living in Whitney Pier continued to work at the nearby steel plant, under close observation, while an unknown but much smaller number was sent to the Amherst camp. As well, some 600 men were sent from Amherst to work in the coal mines of Glace Bay and Dominion, while a second group of men was sent from Spirit lake, Que., to work in Cape Breton’s coal mines.

“I would think that some of these people stayed on in Cape Breton,” said Mombourquette, “but most of them left after the war was over. Certainly, some of their relatives are still living in the area today.”

□□□