

## INTERNMENT CAMP PROJECT ACKNOWLEDGES PAST HISTORY: MANY LURED WITH PROMISE OF A BETTER LIFE

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by Darrell Bellaart

A black period in Canadian history when Ukrainian immigrants were locked up and forced to work in labour camps in Nanaimo and other cities is finally being officially acknowledged.

Grants are available to groups and individuals with ideas to shine a light on how the federal government moved eastern Europeans, mainly from the Ukraine, into internment camps during the First World War.

A camp in Nanaimo was one of 24 set up around the country, where people were rounded up, stripped of their possessions and their dignity and put to work building roads and on other projects.

The practice was ostensibly to protect Canada from immigrants labelled enemies of the state, but the end result was years of forced labour for Ukrainians lured here by a promise of land and a better way of life.

A plaque erected several years ago marks the site on the Nanaimo waterfront, near where a camp held Ukrainian immigrants for no other reason than their place of birth.

Little is known about the 125 miners and other labourers interned near what is now Stewart Avenue and Rosehill Street when war broke out in 1914. The men lost everything they owned and were later moved to a camp in Vernon, where they were put to work building roads and other heavy labour tasks.

"The first thing you've got to keep in mind, the Office of Internment Operations, most of the records were destroyed in the late 1950s and '60s," said Lubomyr Luciuk, a historian and Ukrainian Canadian Civil Liberties Association spokesman.

"In Nanaimo you had an internment camp that was run out of the old provincial jail building . . . What happened, these people mainly came from the eastern parts of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, lured to Canada with the promise of employment and free land. War breaks out and these people find themselves branded as enemy aliens. They had done nothing wrong."

Despite international agreements, which Canada signed at the time, the immigrants were locked up and forced to perform jobs too menial for other Canadians.

"They were forced to do this under duress. What little they had wealth was taken from them. Some was given back when they were released but some of the money was held back by the Canadian government."

The dark period in Canadian history was commemorated in Nanaimo some years ago with a plaque erected at the foot of Rosehill Street, overlooking the harbour.

Citizenship and Immigration Canada is offering funding for authors, playwrights, artists and others to create projects that relive that dark period.

Leona Osowetski, a founding member of the Ukrainian Cultural Society of Nanaimo, was involved in the erection of the plaque in Nanaimo.

"It's all relevant how people were treated when they came to Canada, it's part of our heritage," Osowetski said.

"It's important for this knowledge to get out there so these things don't repeat themselves."

For Luciuk, acknowledging Canada's mistakes makes it a better country. Jeanne Rudy, director of Nanaimo's Vesna Ukrainian Dancers, said she'd consider creating a show to retell that part of Nanaimo's history.

"Maybe I'll look into it," Rudy said.

Information on the Canadian First World War Internment Recognition Fund is available from 1-866-524-5314 or e-mail [lesia@shevchenkofoundation.ca](mailto:lesia@shevchenkofoundation.ca).

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