

Redress Required

Why Canada's Treatment of Ukrainians During WWI Still Matters

story Lionel Hughes



This photo captures a sombre moment at the internment camp. Ivan Hryhoryshchuk, lying dead on the rail cart, was killed while attempting to escape from the Spirit Lake, Quebec, internment camp, June 7, 1915. Photo by Sergeant William Buck from the collection *In My Charge*.

It has been 25 years since Lubomyr Luciuk published a pamphlet titled *A Time For Atonement*. His thesis was simple: the internment of thousands of Ukrainian Canadians into concentration camps between 1914 and 1920 needed to be addressed by Canada's government and people.

The picture of Ivan Hryoryshchuk's body at left should be alarming even today. Why did he try to escape the internment camp? Was it because he was, in fact, an enemy alien, set about interfering with Canada's war effort? Or, much more likely, was he trying to return to his family who were hungry and alone? The letters between the interned men and their wives and children are galling. What justification did the Canadian government of the day have to treat citizens as expendable aliens? Why should it matter a century later?

Historical research into the internments began in the mid-1980s when living memory was just about eclipsed. The generation following the internments carried the stories from parents about the deprivations—both physical and legal—that were endured for six dark years. In 2008, as a result of the awareness raised by the research, Bill C-331 was enacted and provided a \$10 million endowment fund through which the internments could be commemorated.

"Hopefully," said Luciuk recently, "no other Canadian ethnic, religious, or racial minority has to suffer as Ukrainians and other Europeans did. Reminding people about this unfortunate incident in Canadian history should at least help us ensure that what happened then and since doesn't happen again."

Luciuk's words resonate rather forcefully on a windswept day at the Saskatchewan Railway Museum just west of Saskatoon. Next to a monument dedicated to soldiers returning from WWI conflict is a solitary typewritten marker noting that this was the site of the holding station for Ukrainians in Saskatchewan—at Eaton. It is a haunting thought that internment camps (of various forms) to contain ethnically defined groups were used a century ago and are still a tool used by western democracies today—frequently very near by.

It is chilling to imagine the suffering that was executed on the Ukrainians and other East Europeans when they were identified as enemy aliens under a federal order.

Saskatoon native Ryan Boyko is busy doing

just that chilling imaginative exercise. The actor and filmmaker has written the script for *Enemy Aliens*, a feature-length dramatic movie, and is ready to start shooting in the winter of 2013. The story follows two brothers on their journey from Ukraine to Canada at exactly the wrong moment in history. They are thrown into the politics of WWI and find themselves in the system of internment camps rather than working toward the better life they had hoped for.

Boyko's inspiration for the movie is rooted deeply in his past. In the mid-1990s, his father took him to see Yuriy Luhovy's film documentary *Freedom Had A Price* at the Saskatoon Public Library. "That was my first experience with racism, my first experience with intolerance toward my culture. I was shocked to know that this had happened in Canada," he says.

Fast forward to the Stratford Festival where Boyko was acting and studying. An opportunity arose to create a one-man play for the 2006 festival season. "The memory of Luhovy's film came to mind and I thought it would make a great play."

He contacted some of the scholars in Canada who have become well known as researchers into the internment era. "They gave me a lot of information. As I waded through it I realized that there was just too much for a one-man play."

The idea to create something around this crucial piece of Canadian history persisted. "The subject was removed from Canadian history books in the 1950s," Boyko says. The passing of Bill C-331 offered a new motivation. With the money available through the endowment fund, the possibility of producing a full-length dramatic movie was within reach. "By 2009, I had created the template for it."

To build a script that is compelling and relevant to contemporary audiences presents a couple of major challenges. "This is not just a Ukrainian story," he says. "The majority of the internees were Ukrainian but there were many others." In fact, Croatians, Serbians, Germans, Hungarians, Romanians, Slovenes, Slovaks, Turks, Bulgarians, Poles, Italians, and Jews were also imprisoned in Canada's network of camps. "I had to try to keep from skewing to only one culture as I wrote. I also want to show that it

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Find out about the surprising *Prairies North* connection with Ryan Boyko's movie *Enemy Aliens*.



At the current site of the Saskatchewan Railway Museum this marker is the only evidence of the Eaton holding station where Ukrainians were gathered for transport to the internment camps.

was a pan-Canadian phenomenon—there were camps from Nanaimo to Halifax. The movie takes place in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta, but the context is much larger.”

Politics is the second difficulty the movie has to navigate. “The trick is telling the truth while telling a good story,” says Boyko. Characters like William Dillon Otter, who oversaw the internment on behalf of the Canadian government, pose an interesting challenge for a writer venturing into new cinematic territory. “In the first draft I wrote him as an anti-hero—not sympathetic at all. When some people read it they cautioned that there is little historical record of what he was actually like. The same goes for other characters. People were in charge but not necessarily bad. This was war.”

The writing process has coincided with the ongoing work of research. There is significant research contained in theses and academic documents. But Boyko felt the need to step beyond that to create a truly representative story.

“I have come across stories as I’ve been writing,” he says. “My grandmother told me that she had an uncle who had to dress up as a girl when he walked into town during the internment period. If he was seen by the police he would have had to pay a bribe to avoid being sent to a camp. You have to hear this stuff. You can’t make it up.”

“The one thing I really have to watch for is too much exposition. If you’re creating a story, you can’t go off preaching about the politics of the time. The lives of the characters have to do that for the audience.”

Boyko sees a profound relevance for a film such as his these days. “People who are younger than 30 have no idea about this piece of Canadian history. People older than 50 may know about it but they don’t have a very deep understanding. There are parallels here with the aftermath of 9/11. Why do we still see a group of people who are different and insist that they are bad?”

“The last living survivor of the camps was a six-year-old girl when she was imprisoned,” he says. “These were forced labour camps—albeit with a very small wage. The camp conditions were

deplorable. When there was food it was often inadequate or well along the way to being rotten. I want the film to capture the way things were.”

The records that could reveal the way things were are sadly incomplete, says Danylo Bodnar, long-standing member of the Ukrainian Canadian Congress (UCC). In 1954, federal files pertaining to the internment were purposely destroyed leaving a massive hole in the data available to researchers. The absence of official documentation leaves questions unanswered for Bodnar and others who want to see the circumstances revealed.

“There are many questions,” says Bodnar. “Why is it that the War Measures Act was effected on August 22nd but people were already being sent to camps a month before that? The British government directed Canada to treat the East Europeans as friendly, not as enemies.”

Bodnar cites current academic research by George Buri of the University of Brandon who argues that the reason for the imprisonments was economically motivated and not driven by worries of compromised national security. This certainly confirms the fears of some who, at the time of the camps, said that treating honest immigrants as criminals would bear bitter fruit.

At the very least, the internment has resulted in a growing urgency to make amends for the century of official silence on the subject. “When I was a teacher,” says Bodnar, “I found one sentence in the school history books referring to Canada’s first internment. What does that say?”

“Some people want to say that it should be let go,” muses Bodnar. “But that is dangerous. Sure, the War Measures Act has been eliminated and emergency measures have to be passed by Parliament. That’s safer but what about if there is a majority?”

The debate among politicians at the time is highly instructive. As strenuously as some argued the dangers of allowing certain ethnicities to remain free during wartime, other voices recognized the horrible violation of human rights that was being executed. To suggest that our era a mere hundred years later is immune to such divergences of opinion is arguably naive.

The UCC is one of several organizations working to make more people aware of these stories. “All Canadians need to hear this,” says Bodnar.

Learn more about the historical research into the internment of Ukrainians at www.infoukes.com or the Ukrainian Canadian Civil Liberties Union, www.ucclu.ca. Find out more about Ryan Boyko’s film project at www.armisticefilms.com



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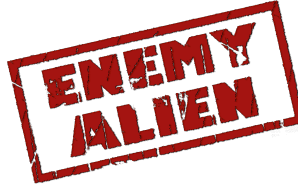
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"Peace cannot be achieved through violence, it can only be attained through understanding." - Albert Einstein



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