

# Remembering the spirit of Canadians unjustly interned

BY LUBOMYR LUCIUK DECEMBER 27, 2011 6:06 PM



Courtesy Lubomyr Luciuk

In the dead of winter, in January 1915, they were transported along the transcontinental railway from Montreal into Quebec's remote Abitibi region. The first prisoners, 109 men, were eventually joined by hundreds more, including women and children, interned not because they had done anything wrong but simply because of who they were, where they were from. Mostly immigrants from western Ukraine, lured to the Dominion of Canada with promises of freedom and free land, they were branded "enemy aliens" at the outbreak of the First World War because they had arrived in Canada with Austro-Hungarian passports.

Offloaded eight kilometres west of Amos, at a place today called La Ferme, the prisoners could just see the shoreline of Spirit Lake, now Lac Beauchamp – from behind barbed wire. Originally their camp was to have been at Belcourt, 75 kilometres further east, but the clever merchants of the Amos Chamber of Commerce lobbied Ottawa for a closer site, then collected a quarter of a million dollars in government trade over the two years the camp operated – a bounty garnished from the injustice of Canada's first national internment operations.

Recently the Spirit Lake Internment Camp centre officially opened. It is housed within the former Roman Catholic church of St. Viateur de Trécesson, adjacent to where internee barracks once stood. The interpretation centre, the result of several years of effort by the Spirit Lake Camp Corporation, includes exhibits explaining how thousands of Europeans from the Austro-Hungarian, German and Ottoman Turkish empires were swept up because of xenophobia and wartime hysteria, suffering imprisonment, the confiscation of what little wealth they had, and other state-sanctioned indignities, including disenfranchisement. All of this was sanctioned by the very same War Measures Act that was deployed during the Second World War against Japanese-, Italian- and German-Canadians and, in 1970, against the Québécois.

Conditions at Spirit Lake were harsh. Visiting in mid-November 1916, the U.S. consul from Quebec City, G. Willrich, reported that prisoners complained they "were badly treated in every way, even beaten ... with no freedom whatsoever." Internee #1100, H. Domytryk, a father of four who had been arrested in Edmonton, jailed at Lethbridge, Alta., then transported to Spirit Lake, showed Willrich a letter from his nine-year-old daughter, Katie: "My dear father: We haven't nothing to eat and they do not want to give us no

wood. My mother has to go four times to get something to eat. It is better with you, because we had everything to eat. This shack is no good, my mother is going down town every day and I have to go with her and I don't go to school at winter. It is cold in that shack. We your small children kiss your hands my dear father. Goodbye my dear father. Come home right away." Efforts to honour the victims began in the mid-1980s, spearheaded by the Ukrainian Canadian Civil Liberties Association. A trilingual plaque was placed at Spirit Lake in 1999, complemented in 2001 with a statue, the Interned Madonna, by John Boxtel, a sculptor from the Kingston, Ont., area. Then in May 2008, following Parliament's passage of the Internment of Persons of Ukrainian Origin Recognition Act, a Canadian First World War Internment Recognition Fund was established, with a multi-year grant making the Spirit Lake interpretive centre possible.

While no internees remain alive – the last known survivors from Spirit Lake, Mary Manko and Mary Hanchurak, passed away in 2007 and 2008 – Dr. Ted Sosiak, whose grandfather was imprisoned in Kingston's Fort Henry, symbolically bore witness for all internee descendants.

Work still needs to be done before the Spirit Lake centre fully meets its charge of educating Canadians about the internment operations, an episode in our nation's history that Jason Kenney, Canada's minister of Canadian citizenship and immigration, has described as "a blight." For one, its exhibits are in French only, a language the internees, guards and most of the officers in charge wouldn't have known. Even more troubling is how the internee cemetery is being allowed to decay, almost entirely lost to the boreal forest despite entreaties addressed to the National Historic Sites and Monuments Review Board, Canadian Heritage, and other agencies.

Mary Manko once wrote: "I was one of the thousands of Ukrainian Canadians rounded up as 'enemy aliens' and put in concentration camps between 1914 and 1920. I was just six years old then. I was born in Canada. I lived in Montreal with my parents, brother John and sisters Anne and Nellie. Nellie was born in Quebec. She was just 2½ when we buried her near the Spirit Lake internment camp.

"Canada's Ukrainians were not disloyal. Our imprisonment was wrong. We were Canadians. Those who, like my parents, had come from Ukraine to Canada, came seeking freedom. They were invited here. They worked hard. They contributed to this country, with their blood, sweat, and tears – a lot of the latter. What was done to us was wrong.

"Because no one bothered to remember or learn about the wrong that was done to us, it was done to others again, and yet again. Maybe there's an even greater wrong in that."

As a place of education, commemoration and reflection, the museum has begun to undo that "even greater wrong," recovering historical memory and righting a historical injustice – a lasting Christmas gift to all Canadians.

For information about Spirit Lake Camp Internment Centre, go to [campspiritlake.ca](http://campspiritlake.ca)

*Lubomyr Luciuk is a professor of political geography at the Royal Military College of Canada in Kingston, Ont.*

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