

## First World War internment camps a 'difficult scar' for Canadian Ukrainians



A plaque and statue of a Ukrainian immigrant mark the site of the 1915 Castle Mountain internment camp near Lake Louise, Alta., on Aug. 20, 2012. (Bill Graveland / THE CANADIAN PRESS)

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CASTLE MOUNTAIN, Alta. -- At the age of 22, Yuri Forchuck was a prisoner of war -- in Canada.

The young man immigrated in 1912 from Ukraine and was homesteading east of Edmonton when, in 1916, the authorities came calling.

He was arrested, declared an "enemy alien" and shipped off to do hard labour in the Rockies.

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### PHOTOS



Yuri Forchuk poses for a wedding photo in 1923. (Handover photo courtesy of Marsha Forchuk Skrypuch / THE CANADIAN PRESS)

"He was at the Jasper internment camp and he escaped," recounted his granddaughter Marsha Skrypuch, "The camp guards shot at him, bullets were whizzing by his ears, but he did manage to escape alive."

Forchuck was one of more than 8,000 individuals put into First World War internment camps across the country because they were considered citizens of the Austro-Hungarian and Turkish empires as well as Germany.

He may have survived his escape, but nothing was ever the same.

"It completely ruined his life because he went into hiding because he had escaped and when he went back to his homestead after the war it had been given up," Skrypuch recalls. "It had been given to an English family so he had absolutely nothing."

Forchuck eventually moved to southern Alberta where he worked in the coal mines. He found himself another homestead but his arrest was something he never really recovered from.

"I was in elementary school when he died and I remember vividly him talking about it," Skrypuch recalled. "It tainted his entire life. He thought this was hanging over his head and thought his past would come up and be thrust in his face like a scandal."

"As a kid I knew that something had happened to him and it was a big secret that he was put in jail for something he didn't do."

The Canadian government identified about 80,000 people as enemy aliens during the First World War and those who were living close to urban centres were required to report to the North West Mounted Police.

Nearly 8,600 were deemed to be a threat to Canada and sent to 24 internment camps across the country, four of which were in the Canadian Rockies. The majority of the prisoners were of Ukrainian descent.

While most people are aware of the internment of Japanese Canadians in the Second World War, the First World War camps are an often overlooked part of Canadian history.

The Harper government set up the \$10 million Canadian First World War Internment Recognition Fund in 2008 to support projects commemorating the experience of the thousands

of Ukrainians and other Europeans interned between 1914--20 and the many others who suffered a suspension of their civil liberties.

A new exhibit on the history of First World War internments in Canada is being built adjacent to the Cave and Basin National Historic Site in Banff, Alta. It is scheduled to open next summer.

"It is a very unknown story in Canadian history," said Parks Canada national historic sites manager Steve Malins.

"The majority were unemployed and quite destitute. They didn't speak the language that well and there were all the other perceived stereotypes of the day and war breaking out."

It's a subject that still provokes an emotional response from those of Ukrainian-Canadian heritage.

"That was the first time the War Measures Act was ever used and it has a very big historical significance," said Olya Grod of the Ukrainian Canadian Congress, who is a board member on the Canadian First World War Internment Recognition Fund.

"It was wartime and I think people's sensitivities were a little different than they were in peacetime. It was a very difficult scar for the Ukrainian community to bear because people did bury this."

More than 100 people died working in the camps. Six were shot and killed trying to escape.

Little remains of the Castle Mountain internment camp in Banff National Park. It is marked by a commemorative sign giving a brief history and a statue of a Ukrainian immigrant with the simple question "Why?" written at its base.

At one point Castle Mountain held 660 prisoners.

Life was hard.

They were housed behind high barbed-wire fences and put to work clearing trees and building a road through the area in the summer months. They were relocated near Banff's Cave and Basin Historic Site when temperatures began to plummet in the winter.

The daily routine called for eight hours of labour, but the march to and from the work site sometimes meant 13-hour days.

The railway track that brought the prisoner's to this remote location along Highway 1A is literally a stone's throw away from the camp. A few strands of barbed wire are visible where the camp once stood.

The Banff exhibit will tell the story in phases and focus on all 24 camps.

"Not a lot of people knew really what the First World War was about or what led up to it or why the Canadian government would decide that it would have internment operations," Malins said.

"The main part of the exhibit is the internee operations from 1914 to 1920 and the conclusion is the legacy and what happened to these people."

Skrypuch and Grod have both made the trip to Castle Mountain.

"I wept. It makes me cry. It's so important to have the recognition and the memory, but it also really hurts," said Skrypuch, who wrote about her grandfather's experience in her book "Silver Threads."

"It still hurts to think that as Canadians, we could have done this to our own. The strength of Canada is in our immigrants and to think we were that kind of country."

Grod shared some of those feelings.

"It was very real," she said.

"It was also a feeling of being very compressed by these mountains and trees around you. There's no getting away -- there's a feeling of entrapment."

Read more: <http://www.ctvnews.ca/canada/first-world-war-internment-camps-a-difficult-scar-for-canadian-ukrainians-1.939742#ixzz2RA1fdmBD>