

CEMETERY ALMOST LOST TO THE FOREST

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They have almost been forgotten.

The picket fence that segregated this hallowed ground from the surrounding boreal forest has collapsed. So have the wooden crosses that once marked their graves.

There are at least 16 bodies interred in a cemetery measuring only 35 by 25 metres. Most were men, a few were children. We know their names, thanks to the determined research of Vernon's Lawrna Myers.

To protect what remains of their privacy, their surnames will not be repeated, save for one man's — for his name was announced in newspapers published in those troubled times.

Six imprisoned infants perished of unknown causes between May 1915 and March 1916. Their names were Jeannette, Olga, Andrez, Jan and Carolka. Another boy, Iwan, died from an intestinal hemorrhage in December 1915.

Six men died between May 1915 and October 1916 — Pawlo, Aksenty, Geo, Wasyl, Stefan and Mike, taken by tuberculosis. Karol died in August 1915 from typhoid fever. Chronic nephritis killed Gregori in October 1916, and tubercular meningitis took Sotiri in January 1917.

Ivan Hryhoryschuk suffered a different fate. He was shot dead, on June 7, 1915, attempting to escape from the Spirit Lake internment camp. Ivan's death warranted front-page coverage, for example, in the Manitoba Free Press of June 23, 1915. So the nation knew something about what was happening to those branded "enemy aliens" by the now-notorious War Measures Act. Most readers likely didn't care.

Not all internees were recent immigrants. Some, like Carolka, were born in Montreal, making her a British subject. Her status did not matter. She became just another one of

the victims of Canada's first national internment operations, along with the rest of her family. His sister, Mary, one of the last survivors, explained why it was so important for Canadians to remember what happened in the First World War, reminding us it had happened again in the Second World War and yet again during the Quebecois Crisis in 1970. Standing on guard for civil liberties and human rights was particularly important, she counselled, in periods of domestic and international crisis. Perhaps if her little sister, Carolka, had not died at Spirit Lake, she, too, would have been a mother, an aunt and a storyteller like Mary. She never got the chance.

At Spirit Lake (now La Ferme), in the Abitibi region of Quebec, the interned men were forced to work for the profit of their jailers and local businessmen, carving an experimental farm out of the woods, as other internees laboured likewise, to the west, at Kapuskasing. Many Spirit Lake prisoners had been residents of Montreal's Pointe-St. Charles working class district, including parishioners of St. Michael the Archangel Ukrainian (Greek) Catholic Church. Additional internees were railroaded in from Petawawa, Beauport, Montreal, Kapuskasing, Toronto's Stanley Barracks, Banff, and the Otter internment camp in British Columbia. At its maximum, the Spirit Lake population swelled to 1,312 internees, including some 60 families. Opened on Jan. 13, 1915, it was shut on Jan. 28, 1917 — Kapuskasing would not close its gates until Feb. 24, 1920, some 14 months after the end of the Great War.

When the American vice-consul, O. Gaylord Marsh, visited Spirit Lake in the autumn of 1915, the cemetery had a large cast-iron cross and several graves with cedar markers. By the time I first visited, in June 1999, one concrete and a few toppling wooden crosses were all that remained. By September 2008, most of those had fallen, so much so that even determining the locations of all 16 graves would have required concerted effort. This unique site is now in much, much worse condition, almost completely lost to the forest.

How did a Catholic cemetery established under federal authority fall into such disrepair? We know that in October 1918, soon after the military left, the Dominion Department of Agriculture assumed control over the property. Eventually, in May 1936, Ottawa let the province of Quebec have the land for a nominal sum. No one cared about the internee cemetery. The land was next sold to a farming couple in 1988. It's now theirs. Whether they have ownership of the cemetery or of its skeletal occupants is another, more contentious, issue.

In the past few years, a permanent display about the Spirit Lake internment camp has been opened at La Ferme, largely thanks to the financial support of the Canadian First World War Internment Recognition Fund. Even earlier, a commemorative plaque (1999) and then a statute, titled "Interned Madonna," were unveiled (2001). Unfortunately, every attempt to secure limited rights of access to the internee cemetery for the purposes of restoring and reconsecrating it have failed. Local feuds had made certain of that.

On Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's website, Minister of Canadian Heritage Melanie Joly is described as "a lawyer by training (who) is passionate about her city of Montreal and the power of positive politics." That's encouraging. For only the intervention of another Montrealer will recover the memory of the innocents transported from her city into the wilderness, whose tombs will forever be lost if she does not act, and soon.

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