

Conference Report: Panel 3, Civilian Internment in Canada, Winnipeg MB, 17-19 June 2015

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From June 17-19, 2015, a group of scholars, curators, community members, lawyers, students, activists, and others gathered in Winnipeg MB to participate in a workshop entitled “[Civilian Internment in Canada: Histories and Legacies](#).” Organized by the Canadian Society for Ukrainian Labour Research, Dr. Rhonda Hinchey of Brandon University, and Dr. James Mochoruk of the University of North Dakota, the conference was an innovative and engaging gathering of diverse interests in the subject of civilian internment in Canadian history. The workshop took place at the [Ukrainian Labour Temple](#) – itself an important artifact with ties to histories of internment operations – over the course of three days, and included events at the [Japanese Canadian Cultural Centre](#) and at the [Canadian Museum for Human Rights](#). A particularly noteworthy highlight of the conference was the keynote lecture given by Dennis Edney, pro-bono lawyer for Omar Khadr. Entitled “The Rule of Law in an Age of Terror,” the talk was a stark reminder of the many ways that issues of perceived threats to national security, state surveillance, and individual rights continue to shape contemporary political debate.

Over the course of the three days, conference participants addressed a range of issues related to civilian internment and its ongoing legacy throughout Canadian history. In addition to examining the history of internment operations during the First and Second World Wars, delegates explored the subjects of Mennonite and other Conscientious Objectors, the forced relocation of Japanese Canadians during WWII, the arrests made during the October Crisis in Quebec under the War Measures Act, as well as broader themes of national security, state policy, radicalism, gender, religion, politics, and ideology. Panelists presented material culture, documentary artifacts, personal experiences and family narratives, examined the pedagogical considerations involved in teaching histories of internment, and discussed the kinds of museological and curatorial issues related to developing exhibitions on this subject matter. These rich, interdisciplinary, multi-themed conversations offered much to reflect upon regarding the impact of internment on public memories and collective histories.

One of the most memorable panels consisted of six individuals who shared their personal connection to internment histories, transmitted by means of family storytelling, oral histories, individual memories, and study of family records and documents.¹ Over the course of this ninety-minute session, Diane Kostyshyn,

¹ See elsewhere in this issue of *Forum* for a transcript of this panel.

Larissa Stavroff, Sid Ikeda, Roland Penner, Grace Eiko Thompson, and Myron Shatulsky recounted a diverse number of stories and histories tied to the legacy of civilian internment in Canada. Their engaging presentations wove individual memories and family histories into broader conversations about state policy, wartime measures, and transnational histories of mobility and migration. The parallels between historical episodes of internment and contemporary issues were also made explicit. An informative and engaging question and answer session followed the formal presentations, opening the space for dialogue to all conference participants.

Both Diane Kostyshyn and Larissa Stavroff shared the stories of family members affected directly or indirectly by internment experiences, garnered through the compilation of family records including poetry, immigration documents, and personal correspondence. In describing the experiences of her grandfather Matthew Kostyshyn, a Ukrainian immigrant labourer and poet who spent time in both the US and Canada in the first few decades of the twentieth century, Kostyshyn highlighted the significance of the transnational networks such figures traversed, as well as their varied contributions to new countries, from labour to artistic expression. Yet, as she also noted, there remains much we do not know about those who lived in past worlds of migration and mobility; in this case, whether or not Kostyshyn was himself interned during wartime. Stavroff then spoke about the internment experiences of two families, the Krechmarowsky family and the Weir family, similarly drawing on documents and stories passed down over generations and emphasizing the impact of internment on women and children. Of particular note was her attention to the ways families stayed in contact, writing letters and cards, throughout the period of detention.

Sid Ikeda then provided a lively and engaging recollection of his own experiences as a child whose family was relocated from their home in Vancouver, British Columbia, first to a holding station at Hastings Park and subsequently to an internment camp for families at Tashme. This forced relocation was part of the federal government's larger initiative to remove Japanese Canadian families from their West Coast homes and place them in various camps throughout the interior of the province and elsewhere. Having been only seven years old at the time, Ikeda remembered playing with fellow children in the camp and feeling a sense of camaraderie and adventure. Yet, he also shared memories of the many hardships and difficulties his family faced, particularly his mother, who worked long and hard to care for her seven children during and after internment and relocation.

Roland Penner then spoke about the internment of his father, Winnipeg city alderman Jacob Penner, who had been detained under the War Measures Act as a political internee during WWII. After providing an overview of the history and logistics of internment operations, Penner emphasized the significance of remembering those who were punished on account of political ideology, in

addition to those interned due to ethnicity. He drew connections between this history and more contemporary issues, including the arrest and detention of suspected radicals during the October Crisis in Quebec. He struck a note of caution about the possibility that such actions on the part of the state could occur again, an issue rendered particularly relevant given the then-recent passing of Bill C-51, with its potential to violate habeas corpus and due process.

In her contribution, Grace Eiko Thompson spoke about the broad, intergenerational impact that forced relocations have had on Japanese Canadians. Her talk highlighted the societal and political context of racism and xenophobia that existed prior to, during, and after the government's program to remove Japanese Canadians from their homes on the West Coast, dispossess them of their belongings, deny their return, and promote so-called 'repatriation' to Japan. Thompson also noted the role of individuals and groups in fighting back against discrimination, racism, and stereotypes. Prominent Japanese Canadians, herself included, sought redress for such historical injustices by demanding recognition of these events as well as working for appropriate representation in public commemorations, museum exhibitions, and other mediums of collective memory.

Myron Shatulsky concluded the panel by describing his personal memories of his father's internment during the Second World War. A young child when authorities came to his house in the middle of the night to detain his father, Shatulsky recalled the significant impact this had on his family, particularly on his mother who was forced to return to work as a seamstress to support the family. Shatulsky also reminded workshop participants to remember that those who were interned were typically ordinary people with families and communities. One of the most memorable moments of the conference occurred when Shatulsky displayed a book his father had brought home from internment camp that included a list of names, thirty-eight men who had been detained there. In reading these names one by one, the audience was reminded of the individuality and humanity of those living in the past.

One of the common themes that emerged across these presentations was the diversity of internment experiences. Many of the panelists emphasized that internees were people first – not statistics or numbers, not 'enemy aliens' or a 'foreign scourge' or any other label or euphemism, but human beings with families, hopes, histories, and aspirations. This theme came across the recollections of family dynamics as they had been impacted by internment operations, so evident in Sid Ikeda's memories of childhood in Tashme and afterward, and in the correspondence between internees and families that Larissa Stavroff described. These stories contribute much to our understanding about the role that internment operations and forced relocations had on families and communities beyond the war itself. The stories also remind us that we cannot generalize internment experiences; while those detained may have shared similar

labels and experiences, the situatedness and individuality of such stories mitigate against generalizations or oversimplified approaches to historical memory.

A related theme that ran throughout the panel was the intergenerational impact that internment experiences had on communities and society beyond the immediate family. The ways in which forced relocations continued to affect Japanese Canadians over the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, for instance, was clear in the stories of Sid Ikeda and Grace Eiko Thompson. Each spoke to the enduring legacy of relocation on issues like community cohesiveness, identity, resilience, culture, as well as on efforts to mobilize against the continued existence of derogatory stereotypes.

The impact of internment operations on our rights and freedoms, and the connections and parallels to be drawn between diverse historical episodes of internment with contemporary challenges was also a key theme emerging from this panel. This subject was particularly poignant in Myron Shatulsky's recollections, and in Roland Penner's comments. Penner compared the political rhetoric at play in the internment of his father during the Second World War to the subsequent targeting of leftists during the Cold War, to today's situation where Bill C-51 gives state authorities and the police sweeping powers of surveillance. This, Penner argued, poses a threat to civil liberties and the right to privacy and spotlights much broader issues concerning belonging, inclusion, diversity, and plurality – issues that were also at play during historical episodes of internment.

Above all, this panel reinforced the significance of sharing stories so that these episodes are not forgotten, so the memories remain alive and remind us of our collective heritage, both positive and negative. Without reaching tidy conclusions about the lessons learned from the past or drawing neat lines from past to present, the recollections and observations shared during this session remind us of the ways in which issues regarding national security, individual rights, and diversity and inclusion continue to animate public discourse. It is our collective responsibility to keep such conversations alive, to ensure all Canadians understand such episodes of the nation's past and its individual and societal impact on a wide range of communities.

In the months since the workshop in June 2015, a number of events, from terrorist attacks in Paris to debate within Canada over religious pluralism and refugees, continue to spark debate over issues of national security and the boundaries of inclusion. The racialization and marginalization of those seen as 'foreign' or 'alien' to Canada, the perceived conflict between individual rights and national security, the attacks on ideals of inclusion, diversity, and equality that occur during times of heightened fear – such issues, key as they were during historical times of war and internment, seem pertinent today as in the past. My hope is that the stories shared here remind us of our responsibility to value

difference and welcome those in need, to resist discourses of fear and xenophobia, and to not let the history of internment and exclusion repeat itself today.