CONTROVERSY SURROUNDS MOUNT HOPE CEMETERY PLOT

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Category: Opinions

International Intrigue

By Heather Ibbotson Brantford Expositor, 2 August 2013

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The plaque would have a dual purpose of marking an early Ontario Muslim burial plot while also telling the story of a 1914 roundup of about 100 so-called “enemy aliens” during the First World War.

Researcher Bill Darfler shows one of two stones with Arabic script, which may be boundary markers of a Muslim plot in the northeast corner of Mt. Hope Cemetery in Brantford, Ontario on Thursday, August 1, 2013. The plot, dating back to 1912, measures approximately 33 x 33 feet and contains 16 graves, the last burial having taken place in 1963. (BRIAN THOMPSON Brantford Expositor)

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The apparent linking of the two is misleading, critics say, adding that a recent visit by representatives from the Turkish consulate in Toronto to Mayor Chris Friel's office and the cemetery hints at a political agenda.

Opponents of the plan have created an online petition to “stop the fake monument” in Brantford.

Friel said this week that the plans for a plaque have "taken a pause," while local officials talk with representatives from the federal government.

"It's never a good idea for local government to wade in" without making the federal government aware of what is going on, he said.

"There is no desire or interest in turning this into an international incident," Friel said.

Brant MP Phil McColeman was unavailable for comment. A call to the Turkish consulate in Toronto this week was not returned.

The small Muslim plot was created in 1912 in the northeast section of Mount Hope cemetery and was for many years referred to as the Turkish plot, although the people buried there appear not to be ethnic Turks, said local researcher Bill Darfler.

People referred to as Turks a century ago are not necessarily the same people as those referred to as Turks today, he said.

The majority of the 16 people buried in the plot are believed, by their names, to be Alevi, a relaxed form of Islam which does not require women to be veiled and which allows both sexes to be involved in religious services, Darfler said.

The first burial in the plot in 1912 was noted by The Expositor as "the first Mohammedan funeral ever held in this city."

Records indicate the plot contains only two relatively modern tombstones (1941 and 1963), while the other 14 people there are buried in unmarked graves dating from 1912 to 1918, along with two burials in 1939.

The fact that most of the graves are unmarked may not have any significance in itself. There are untold numbers of other unmarked graves in local cemeteries, of people of varying heritage, due to families being unable to afford gravestones, people dying without family, as well as damage and marker deterioration due to the passage of time. As well, it is not known whether the placement of markers was even an accepted practice for Muslim burials a century ago.

Then comes the second half of the story.

In November 1914, days after the declaration of war between Great Britain and Turkey, Brantford police received orders from Ottawa to detain all local Turks (largely factory workers), resulting in a roundup of about 100 men who were briefly held at the jail, then at the armories before being transported by train out of the city, eventually ending up at an internment camp in Kapuskasing.

Several years ago Darfler received a grant to collect information about this historical incident and its aftermath. His work on that project eventually came to the attention of people in Turkey and elsewhere.

Fast forward to 2013 and a visit by Turkish consul general Ali Riza Guney, who toured the Mount Hope cemetery site and called on Friel.

Darfler, who was on hand during the cemetery visit, said the Turkish government was interested in the fate of early Turkish people in North America.

The result was a proposal to erect a headstone or plaque listing the names of those buried on the site, and telling the story of the 1914 internees.

“The intention is to do right by these guys,” Friel said. “It's unfortunate they've gone as long as they have in unmarked graves.”

One major problem with this is that it is impossible to prove that any of the people buried in the plot were among the individuals detained at the outset of the First World War. In fact, seven of the men are certain to have no connection as they died prior to the 1914 incident, Darfler said.

Added to all of this is concern from the Canadian-Armenian community that the sudden interest in a long-forgotten section of a Brantford cemetery is simply a politically motivated gesture by the Turkish government.

A properly labelled plaque recognizing the plot as an early Muslim burial ground would be entirely appropriate, said Toronto resident Sam Manougian, a member of the Armenian National Committee of southern Ontario.

But trying to tie the cemetery to the First World War internment incident, without any proof, is too much of a stretch, he said.

As well, a plaque or monument “identifying (those buried in the plot) with Turkey and the Turkish government would be an injustice,” Manougian said, adding that such a move would be a “slap in the face” to long-deceased Alevi who, among others including Armenians, had fled Turkey (the former Ottoman Empire) because of persecution.

The idea of having a monument endorsed by the Turkish government that incorrectly labels Alevi as though they were Turks is a “real injustice,” Manougian said.

“It would not be a correct representation,” he said.

Opponents to the plan have posted an online petition to “Stop the Fake Monument” at www.Keghart.com.

The petition states in part: “We condemn the Turkish ambassador's interference into Canadian domestic affairs . . . .and exploitation of the memory of the non-Turkish internees for Ankara's propaganda purposes. We also call for the cancellation of the fake monument's construction.”

The petition had gathered 208 signatures by Thursday afternoon.

Visit PETITION - Stop the Fake Monument