

## We must pay attention to world events

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Canada is a great country.

What makes it unique in the world is its cultural harmony. We are a true melting pot, a coming together of world peoples who are proud to be new Canadians, yet retain their cultural pride.

And that makes our country so much richer.

After all, Canada, home to our aboriginal cultures, was populated by Europeans and we turned into a true United Nations. They all helped shape our history.

Following the Second World War, untold Europeans fled their homelands to find new lives in North America and Canada was a preferred destination of many. They came here and helped build this country's infrastructure, businesses, roads, subdivisions and melded their cultures with others who

So, in many respects we owe a great deal to our European forefathers and most of us have roots in far-away lands.

I remember doing a project on my dad in high school and his home country Latvia. None of my friends, and few teachers, even knew where Latvia was.

In brief, Latvia joins Lithuania and Estonia as a trio of Baltic countries, perched on the Black Sea, bordered by Russia, Belarus and Poland. The Scandinavian countries of Norway, Finland, Sweden and Denmark are just a boat trip away across the water.

Because of their strategic location on the sea, they suffered during the Second World War. First, Germany occupied those countries and as the war progressed, fought the advancing Russian forces. One of the last battles of the war took place in Courland (Kurland), Latvia as Russian soldiers fought the remaining German forces.

We all know about post-war Europe and how Communist Russia took control of these countries, as well as nearby Belarus and the Ukraine.

My dad hated the fact his homeland was under Russia's thumb for decades.

I listened intently to his stories about his relatives, his early years and the war. Like most Europeans, he was proud of his native land, its natural beauty and its people.

Something I will never forget is seeing censored letters returned to us from the Russian government, that contained sentiments about life in the west deemed to be contraband to their citizens. The letters literally had big black lines through every third sentence, eliminating any reference to our happy, democratic lifestyles.

This is something you can't really put into words, but I remember my dad actually shedding a tear or two when he got these letters returned. It broke his heart.

He was overjoyed when the Berlin Wall came crumbling down in 1989. Years later, he went for a final visit to see his relatives, and while he enjoyed his trip, he remarked how the years of Russian rule allowed his country to degrade.

My mother and her siblings came to Canada from Germany (with maternal roots in Poland). They were young teens during the war and also suffered under Russian occupation. The details of my mom's escape to the west were vague and fragmented, mostly because

of a horrific incident she never discussed.

My generation is lucky in that I have these stories, this history and this cultural lineage to understand about and embrace. It's part of who I am. It's how I got here.

It's been said that how can you know where you're going if you don't know where you came from.

True enough.

I may never fully understand the old school mentality and depth of European pride.

We take our own sense of Canadian nationalism for granted. Canada has always been democratic, bountiful, peaceful and a safe haven for all. We've never experienced war on our soil, hunger, drought, famine, plagues or natural disasters.

And that may be part of our short-sightedness.

Given the fact we all have traceable roots going back eons, we should be more mindful of world history, current events and political crises that arise.

The current situation in the Ukraine is a case in point.

The whole world is talking about it, we've exchanged harsh words and sent envoys to various emergency sessions.

Yet, what do we know about the politics, history and struggles in that country? Ukrainian Canadians are extremely passionate about their homeland, as expected.

From what I gather, the Russians are flexing their muscles because their pro-Russian Ukrainian leader was ousted and they don't want to lose control of their interests and military port.

Will it lead to war? Will it result in the creation of a new European state, or will Russia try to annex Crimea?

Regardless of the outcome, the situation is tense for Ukrainians the world over.

And we should be supporting them and their efforts to create a stable, democratic system that enables them to be self-sufficient global trading partners.

We don't have to be political experts to know what's fundamentally right and wrong.

Conflict is always political and it always hurts people -- men, women and children.

We have to do what we can to prevent any more walls or barbed wire fences. The time is long past for any sort of imperialism.

The bottom line is we have to give more than a passing thought to the plight of our European relatives, and more fully understand the big picture.

Let's start now!