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Lest we forget

Walking along Pershotravneva street in Kremenchuk, I saw someone throw an entire loaf of bread into the street from an open window on the fourth floor. I shivered. I remembered the year 1933. The famine.

Our village Yalyntsi, at that time, was spread out just above the mouth of the river Sula up the Dnipro River. Today, the so-called Kremenchuk Sea splashes its dirty waves there. The village was big. Hardworking and friendly families of villagers, who had received land following the Revolution, lived well and aspired to be productive. In almost every homestead there were cows, oxen, horses, sheep, pigs, and various poultry. The villagers had bread and something to put on it. Along with the individual homesteads in the village there were working cooperatives. The village enriched itself with each passing day, life was becoming better.

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Like a terrifying nightmare, mass collectivization befell the villagers like snow on one's head. The sounds, laughter and songs of the village disappeared. People walked around gloomily, whispering among each other. Soon, seven collective farms were organized in the village where carts and sleighs were gathered, oxen and horses were

led. At the centre of the collective farms were the homesteads of de-kurkulized villagers. But what kind of kurkuls were they? They lived perhaps better than others thanks to their work and hardworking families. None of them exploited hired workers although all of them were persecuted, and many of them never returned to their native village from Stalin's camps.

On one such homestead, our collective farm was organized and named after Chubar. The announcement about bread procurement was heard for the first time in the spacious house divided in half. As I recall this house full of villagers today, covered in ashes—a dirty table, at the corner of the table sat an authority

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from the raion and other activists, and above the window, where icons had hung, now hung a portrait of Stalin. At that time I knew this face well from a school textbook, and one time I had cut out this portrait from the newspaper and, using crumbs of rye bread moistened with my saliva, I glued it under the icons. Later, my father told me that perhaps this glued portrait saved us from dekurkulization (it caught the eye of an authority from the raion). Or maybe the fact that our neighbour was a much richer family than ours played some role—this homestead was better-liked by one of the activists, P.P. Chorny. The owner of the homestead, Kh.M. Koval, and his entire family were forced out of the house, clothing and all, everything was ransacked, and soon after P.P. Chorny himself settled in this house. And this was not a unique incident: the wave of dekurkulization and bread procurement brought in various shady characters,

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layabouts and rogues, who signed up as activists to be able to force out the owners and settle on the best homestead.

Many of the people in our village were born at the turn of the 20th century. All of them assert that the famine began as a result of the mass extortion and total depletion of grain, and was not at all due to the so-called poor harvest of 1933. Stalin and his team orchestrated a mass extermination of our people. The authorities of the raion would often engage harsh and vile people, sometimes even social outcasts, who were managed by the director of the school, Vasyl Borysovych Kuts. I remember when these activists came to us, dug up everything top to bottom, poked around in the yard with sharp metal poles, and then this Kuts pulled

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the Mauser pistol from a wooden box (apparently he always carried it around to terrify the locals) and began pointing it at my father's face, insulting him in front of me in every possible way, although he knew I was his student, and later threatened to shoot the search brigade members [*upovnovazhenykh]* as well because they did not find anything. It is true that on the stove, underneath some burlap there were two handfuls of millet, mother purposefully sat me down on them, but it did not help: they pushed me aside and took the millet. Even a piece of tallow disappeared from behind the stove.

In fulfilling their task, some of the activists carried out terrible crimes. They harassed people, demanding bread: burned their faces with cigarettes, poked needles beneath their fingernails, broke their fingers with doors, ripped out beards, and there were even cases of murder.

In this way, grain was completely squeezed out of the village, there was not even anything left for sowing. By the winter

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of 1932-33 there was already a terrible famine. They crushed willow-bark and corncob cores in mortars, and cooked some kind of balanda [thin and lean broth]. There were no

more dogs or cats in the village. Those who still had (as a last hope of survival) some pantry [supplies][1] or a goat, were forced to guard it with pitchforks to protect from theft. Many beggars appeared in our village from neighbouring villages, who extended their hands like ghosts to beg for something to eat. Dirty, with deeply sunken eyes, they were terrifying. And some of them, when they drank a lot of water, swelled up, their legs became like logs, the water sloshed inside them like in a leather sack. And so they died, without any help, on the street. There were cases of cannibalism, even of one's own children (a woman named Pistrelychka). Specially organized burial teams pulled corpses out of homes (sometimes entire families died), gathered the dead

on roads and took them on carts to the graveyard. There they were buried haphazardly in one ditch because the gravediggers were so weak that they too would soon need to be buried there. Sometimes people were found among the corpses who were still living but hopeless[2]. Some asked to be put out of their misery. This terrifying picture can be completed with one more fact. Our neighbours H.I. Koval and I.D. Lyntvar starved their own children to death for the sake of their own survival.

The famine took about five hundred people from this world. When compared to other steppe villages that stretched further up along the Sula River, this number seems insignificant (considering that the village was rather large).

There were two explanations for this.

First. Environmental conditions. To the south of the village flowed the powerful Dnipro River with its numerous bays, channels and lakes, where fish and wildlife proliferated. At the onset of spring, all those who were still able

[1] *Komirchyna.*
[2] *Beznadiini* - not likely to survive.

to walk rushed to shallow waters to catch fish, frogs, mollusks and such. A good portion of the villagers spent their days and nights here, not returning to their homes. When the spring waters began flowing, it was possible to kill the water rats that were forced onto small islands by flooding. Eggs of various aquatic birds were also gathered, this is how we survived.

The second reason. Among the various representatives who were sent to carry out “bread procurement [*khlibovykachku*],” and also among the activists of the village, were members of the party who (in their heart) had a different position on this campaign. Unexpectedly, the director of the school, V.B. Kuts was fired from his position. He was replaced by Ivan Ivanovych Pshenychnyi, a prudent and good person, whom my fellow villagers remember with great respect. The activists changed their behaviour considerably. Besides this, I remember well that, even while Kuts was in charge, in the evenings when it was dark,

the head of the village council Yakiv Petrovych Perepylytsia came to visit my father for secret discussions. The first time, he expressed dissatisfaction that I had seen him, and father more than once spanked me for my curiosity. Later I learned that, more than once, he warned my father of a possible “visit” by the activists to our street and father would disclose this to the neighbours. They say that the head of the Committee of Poor Peasants (*KNS - Komitet nezamozhnykh selian*), M.I. Maliar, behaved similarly.

As well, it is worth mentioning Andriy Yosypovych Kirshko, who for that time was a well-read and educated person. He was also recruited by Kuts as an activist but quickly understood the essence of this activity that was, as he called it, “against human nature,” wrote letters of protest to various institutions and was rumoured to have had a meeting with Chubar himself. After this incident, the bread procurement plan was reduced by one-third. But this didn’t help much because there was already no bread in the village. The high death rate among the villagers

left a depressing impression on Kirshko. He distributed all of the food that he had to beggars and eventually he ended up in their situation. It is as if I can see him now: tall, with long locks of hair which fell to his shoulders, with mad eyes, already swollen with hunger, frequently crossing himself and stumbling, every day he goes to the village council to say once more that things cannot go on like this, that the village is dying … each time, by the order of Kuts, he was thrown out of the building, under the fence. Eventually it was discovered that he had cut up his children, all three of them, and pickled them like pork in a barrel. Nonetheless he died there under the fence. Maybe this was the protest of a madman against the abuse of our people? It is hard to answer this question. But what courage, bravery and feelings of mercy must one have to, in this terrifying time, dare sabotage bread procurement and help people in their terrible misfortune.

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