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The Famine (What I Witnessed)

Indeed, I know the famine not from stories, or books, or movies. I am now 70 but the year 1933 often flashes through my mind because I lived through it, and that horrible year 1933 has remained in my memory my whole life. We lived in a big harmonious family of nine. Everyone in the family, young or old, worked hard so we could have bread and even something to put on it. And then came 1933. You can't say that the harvest was poor that year. No. There was grain and potatoes. But our homestead was subject to such a grain requisition plan that it was impossible to fulfill. They imposed it once, twice, and a third time until they had expropriated all the bread. Then they began summoning my father to the Village Council and threatening him: if you do not give us grain, we will put you in prison and convict you. Father could not really respond to those threats as there was no grain left in our pantry. Father did not believe that the Soviet state, which he had fought for, could punish an innocent person. He told them truthfully that we had no grain and that we were living on potatoes only.

They did not believe him. And then "the enforcers [*buksyry*]" showed up in the village. That's what the people were called who went from home to home with metal spears and pierced through the ground, hay, and straw, looking for grain. The enforcers themselves were people from our village. It was hard to believe that they were capable of doing this. And they could take whatever their hands could grasp. For example, one of the enforcers took a shoe-making tool that my brother used to make boots for people. The enforcers came to our house more than once. They behaved so that people would

be afraid of them. If people saw them going from house to house, a signal would follow: “the enforcers!” Maybe adults were not as afraid of these “enforcers” as we children were, who trembled at hearing the word “enforcers.” And one time Mother had baked dry flatbread (my uncle had given us some flour). Someone shouted: “the enforcers!” and my brother Hrysha (he was six) grabbed two flatbreads, wrapped them in a piece of cloth and sat on the stove putting the flatbread underneath him. He thought that the flatbread was real bread. One of the “enforcers” climbed onto the stove,

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pulled the flatbread rudely from under my brother and threw it in the garbage. “The enforcers” left the house, and my brother (I remember it clearly) climbed down from the stove with such terrible eyes, and white and red spots appeared on his face. His bewilderment and nervous breakdown was so extreme that he became ill and shouted through the night “Don’t take it... don’t take...”! And in two days my little brother passed away...

This was how Stalin forced people onto collective farms, and many were forced into the afterworld. My dear father also died from starvation. How terrible the famine was. It took half the people in our village, and not less in neighbouring villages. After my father's death, a boy was put beside him in the one grave because all of the members of the boy's family were swollen and unable to dig a grave. We ate “*matorzhenyky*”¹ made of corncobs, orach, and sorrel. I would have probably died too if I had not gone to live with my sister who had a dairy cow. That is the only way we could survive. We picked sorrel in the meadows, baked *matorzhenyky* from it and ate this with milk. And we also made cheese and *riazhanka*² [] with it.

“The enforcers” were also carrying out their business in my sister's village but they were not as brutal. However, people there were dying from hunger as well. As I recall, 17 young boys were buried in one grave because there was no one to dig individual graves for them. My sister's cow was stolen more than once, but we managed

¹ A type of pancakes.

² Fermented baked milk.

to find her thanks to the help of good people. But the most terrible thing was that people ate people. I remember well how a mother butchered her two children but did not finish eating them because the police came to her house, pulled dried children's bodies out of the oven, and found their heads behind the wardrobe wrapped in cloth. Oh, what a horror it was! How horrible that famine was... in 1933. How many innocent people died from the famine. And how many innocent people were executed... in 1937-38! This was all possible because of Stalin's [personality] cult. May he be cursed forever. His remains should not be in Moscow! All people who survived the famine curse him.

Ye. Pinchuk