No. 205

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Dear Volodymyr Antonovych [Maniak]!

I, Ivan Mykolaiovych Ilchenko, am a retiree. I was born and raised in a peasant family in Polovetsky hamlet (*khutir*), located on the famed Bohuslav land, on the bank of the Ros River. Running through the settlement is the ancient road from Bohuslav to Korsun-Shevchenkivskyi.

I remember the horror of the famine of 1933, because I was an eyewitness and survived this terrible time with my entire family and fellow countrymen. I was then 13 years old.

Famine is a terrible word that chills the souls of all who have experienced it, all who have encountered it. The poet has the following words:

> A sharp pain for [nineteen] thirty-three, mother,
> Still torments me to this day…
> Your ration—grams of half-baked bread—
> You carried home to me so that I would not die.
>
> We waited for the greens in the meadows
> Nettles, sorrel, and orache
> To somewhat quench with them our suffering,

And maybe save ourselves from tragedy…

It is as if the poet were speaking about me in his poem.

Ours was a farming family for generations: everyone loved the land, cultivated it opportunely, and she, mother-earth, rewarded us with prosperity.

In the fall of 1932, a brigade of activists, along with a district (*raion*) representative, went from house to house in the village with long, iron spikes and stabbed almost every centimeter of land in the house, storehouse, yard, shed, and cellar, looking for hidden grain. Wherever they found some, they dug it up, and when the mother and children grabbed at the bundle, begging the brigade [not to take it], the latter shoved both children and mother aside and carried the small bundle out to a wagon standing in the yard. The crying, weeping, and wailing of mothers and children could be heard from the houses that the notorious brigade had visited.

Our family had no grain, but we had 12 kg of hemp seeds that mother had hidden for sowing hemp in the garden in spring. The bundle lay at the bottom of a chest among towels, linen, and clothes. They searched through it, found the bundle, and took it away. Until the end of her days, mother remembered [the scene] with tears and related the story to her grandchildren like a fairy tale...

In the spring of 1933 there was no grain. Easter was approaching in April. I, as the eldest of three children, saw my father leaning against the window crying, while my mother asked aloud through her tears: from what am I to bake the Easter bread (*paska*)?.. In the attic of the house, father found beet seeds from previous years, crushed them in a mortar, sifted them, and mother baked a black, dry, cracked, and crumbled *paska*. The beet seeds proved useful…

When it warmed up, my father packed into a bag some embroidered towels, bleached home-woven cloth, tablecloths, woolen headscarves, colorful wide Cossack

belts, necklaces, ducats—all of mother's dowry that was left from their wedding and was stored in a chest. My father took all this to the Kursk oblast to exchange for grain and bread.

We had a cow. She was kept in the house with our whole family during those terrible times of famine. Milk, in fact, saved us from starvation. In the spring there were nettles, sorrel, orache, white acacia flowers, birch and boxthorn leaves, and linden bark. All this was dried, pounded, and sifted through a sieve. It was mixed with water and baked in an ungreased pan in the form of pancakes and eaten with sour or fresh milk. Mother called this dish "dailies" (*shchodennyky*).

My father worked as a groom on the collective farm and received 300 grams of half-baked bread made with lentils (legumes). Father divided these grams into equal parts for the five members of his family. Father had heavy, swollen legs from starvation and work.

Many people walked along the old road. The doors of the house never closed on starving beggars. As one group came in, another left. A swollen person would walk in (the appearance of a starving person is terrible) and ask in a hoarse voice: "Oh, dear mother, little swallow, little dove, little bird, dearest cuckoo, let me have at least what you have in the bowl…"

Mother would put half a cup of milk into the swollen hands stretched out in front of her. Whole families died out. The houses stood empty with open doors and broken windows, serving as a refuge for owls and eagle-owls, who cried mournfully…

The dead were taken out of the houses and placed on carts without a coffin, without the proper attire, without memorial services and last farewells. They were taken to the cemetery and stacked in one wide, shallow pit, one next to the other, and in the evening, when the pit was filled, they covered the bodies with earth. Those who removed the dead were given 500 grams of half-baked and heavy bread. There were also instances in which a dying man, swollen from hunger, was still breathing, still alive, but he was dragged out of the house along with the dead.

People died on the move, under fences. Yovsym Khomenko—father of nine children, Hanna Mykhailyk—mother of five children, Matei Vdovychenko—father of four children, Yevdokym Khomenko, Yevhen Polovets, Kyrylo Yatsenko, Kalenyk Stebliuk, and many, many other villagers died under a fence. There was also an incident of strangling in the Polovetskyi hamlet in which a boy of about eight or nine, looking for something to eat, climbed through the window of a neighbor's house and ate three potatoes. He was discovered in the house by the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law and they strangled him to death.

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During the planting of potatoes in the spring, hungry people walked through the gardens and dug potatoes out of the holes, eating them raw on the spot. The landowner and a relative took one such child by the arms and legs and, swinging her, threw her into the marsh at the edge of the Ros River. The nine-year-old girl died in the bushes and marsh.

The villagers reported that in one large family, they ate their boy, but the whole family died all the same. In early spring, people waded into the cold Ros River to catch turtles on the riverbed, contracted a cold, and died. One man who lived in the field with his large family, Vyfaten Musii (*sic*), said that there was nothing more disgusting to eat than mice. The family ate mice, and crows, and sparrows. The man was a hunter. The whole family died.

When the ears of rye started ripening, people began to pluck them and pick out the half-ripened kernels [*polovynchati zerniata*]. Two women who were pulling weeds in the beet field and plucked a dozen ears of rye each were sentenced to three years of imprisonment. Many people who lived to see the new grain harvest and finally eat their fill, died, screaming from the sharp pains in their stomachs for the whole village to hear.

When I organized a celebration for the diamond (sixty years of married life) wedding anniversary of my parents, my mother Sofiia Antonivna Ilchenko and my father

Mykola Nychyporovych Ilchenko, my father said: During my married life, the most frightening and unforgettable events in our lives were the 1933 year of the famine and the war with fascist Germany in 1941-45. And the brightest, happiest event was when all the members of our family, having survived, met in the family home after a frightening and deadly war in the arms of their mother. My father, brother, and I fought on the fronts of the war, and my sister was sent to Germany as a forced laborer. Our elderly mother was alone…

In 1933, 52 people died of starvation; in 1941-45, 30 people died in the war. Thirty-two young people were sent to forced labor in Germany. Such was the situation in my birthplace—the Polovetsky hamlet.

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Signature