Letter from Mariia Herasimchuk to Volodymyr Maniak, 19 December 1989

Regarding events in Ivankiv, Cherniakhiv raion, Zhytomyr oblast

I am a citizen of the village of Ivankiv of the Cherniakhiv raion of Zhytomyr Oblast.

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I subscribe to the newspaper *Silski visti* [The Village News]. It is very interesting to me, particularly at this time. I read the article dated December 9th of this year titled “Famine: 33” and decided to write to you [about] what I saw with my own eyes.

I am already 69 years old. In 1933 I attended 5th grade of [elementary] school in the neighboring village of Zorokiv, 2 kilometers from our village. My father did not fall under the category of eventual dekurkulization and he did not own any debts to the village council. Nevertheless, in the fall of 1932, the village council arrived and took from us certain things. There were potatoes, grain and beans on the oven ready for baking and two kilograms of beans and poppy seeds and they took this. And they collected the pillows, the bed linens, and the clothes, and in the end they dragged the cow out of the barn and left us 5 souls to [perish] a hungry death.

When they were leading the cow out of the barn, my mother stood crying and begged them to at least leave behind the cow for us. I, as the oldest, and my 2 younger brothers, were screaming and squealing, and grabbed the cow by the tail and pulled it towards ourselves, while this servant of idolatry who was pulling the cow, threw a baton at us and yelled “go away or you’ll get it in the ribs.” The next day I went to school crying and walked into the office and told the principal everything and said that I can’t go to school hungry and that I will be forced to quit my lessons. The director of the school advised me to personally write a complaint to Kyiv to comrade Postyshev with a request to return the cow. I wrote to Postyshev personally -- both the complaint and the request, the way I knew how. After a few days, I received a reply and so did the Raispolkom (Raion Executive Committee) with instructions to return the cow to us. As a result, the Village Council returned our cow to us and this cow saved our life. Our mother churned out the butter and then our father carried it to Zhytomyr to some Jewish acquaintances, and then he would bring back one loaf of bread, the kind that now not even a dog would eat. But we were hungry, so our father would cut a tiny piece of that bread for borsch made from sheep’s sorrel, goosefoot, and white bread. [There were] no potatoes and no groats and the bread was so good then that one would have eaten it all then and there. But our father apportioned the loaf for a whole week for 5 people. One day on a Sunday my father took me with him to Zhytomyr, for both of us to stand in separate lines to get bread, because they were handing out one loaf per person. As we walked to Zhytomyr, a distance of 18 kilometers, I saw a dead person lying over there, and then a second and third one lying over there, and it was like this along the entire way – dead people were lying around and nobody paid attention to them. We reached the city. Already from afar a large crowd could be seen near the store. We made our way to the store. It was such horror and mayhem. There was a throng of people and so much screaming and bickering that we just couldn’t stand it. Whoever was weaker simply collapsed under one’s knees. Whoever was slightly stronger trampled over them with their feet. Everyone was trying to make their way through to the door of the store. Those who were trampled underfoot were left for dead. My father looked at all this and went to the Jews, gave them the butter and they gave him a loaf of bread. One other thing I know. In the village of Zorokiv, where I went to school, there lived a family, a mother, a daughter and the son-in-law; the daughter and son-in-law were exiled to Siberia and the Village Council took everything of theirs. The mother wound up alone and wasn’t able to fend for herself, she was starving and lay down, and rats began gnawing at her when she was alive. She did not have the strength to chase them away so they chewed up her calves and thighs and that’s how she died.

The people saved themselves mainly by [eating] rotten potatoes. They foraged through the kolhosp [collective farm] fields and baked potato dumplings, and cooked sheep sorrel, goosefoot, and clovers. People saved themselves whichever way they could. People were not the only ones who perished. Cattle, belonging to people, as well as the cattle in the “kolhosps” were not able to stand on their own legs. The cattle would be raised upright and then they would fall again. And the horses were so thin and emaciated that they too would collapse and perish. When it came time in the spring to plant potatoes, the people would rush with fervor [into the fields] in order to steal and hide under their arms at least 5 potatoes, and in such a way a family would manage to live through another day.

In 1933, this was a very big calamity for the people, immense misery. It’s difficult to think about it now and to withstand this horror.

And this is how Stalin ruled over us in Ukraine.

And some people lived to see a new loaf of bread and ate their fill and then suddenly died.