Letter from Ivan Horb to Volodymyr Maniak, ca 14 December 1988.

Regarding events in Smotryky, Pyriatyn raion, Poltava oblast

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Greetings Volodymyr Antonovych.

Having read the article “Famine: 33” in the 9 December 1988 issue of the newspaper *Silski visti*, I realized that indeed there are people who will write about this tragedy as part of the history of the Ukrainian nation, in order for our descendants to know about this horrible calamity.

I was born in 1922 and am a native of Poltava oblast, of the Pyriatyn district of the village of Smotryky. I am an invalid (2nd Group) of the war. My name is Horb, Ivan Fylymonovych.

Although I was 11 years old in 1933, I nevertheless remember very well, because I myself was hungry and swollen from the famine.

My father, Horb, Fylymon M. in 1930 filed a petition to join the “kolhosp” (collective farm). He hitched a couple of horses to his wagon, loaded up his farming equipment and transported it to the kolhosp. And then, I’m not exactly sure when, but after a few days he went to check up on the horses, and found them standing in the same spot where he had left and fastened them. The horses were gnawing at the tree to which they were tied to. My father felt bad for the horses and took them back home. He joined the kolhosp in 1934.

In 1931-32, my father farmed on his own, although land for individual farmers had already been allotted, separately. In 1932, my father gathered the harvest and fulfilled his government-imposed grain quota before the state. The rest of the grain (mainly rye), he stored under the oven and told our family that no one will confiscate the grain, because he had fulfilled the grain quota. In 1933 (I don’t remember the exact month, although I know it was during the winter), representatives from the Village Council came to us (back then they were called “activists”) with iron rods – one end was sharpened – and told my father to hand over whatever grain he had. My father replied that he fulfilled the required plan which had been imposed on him in accordance with his property, and showed them the receipt for the consigned grain. The conversation was short. “Tell us where the grain is and things will be easier for you,” they said. Then my father pointed under the oven but refused to pull out the grain. Then one of the activists took off his overcoat and crawled under the oven and pulled out the grain. They poured it into sacks and my father transported the grain to the kolhosp. Afterwards, when the activists left, my mother crawled under the oven and swept out about a bucket-load of rye, and as she cried, she said, “children, this is all we have left to live on until the next harvest” (there were nine siblings in our household). After this, when the weather became warmer, the six older children set out from the home. I did not know then where they were going. We, the younger children remained by our father’s and mother’s side, i.e. I as the older one, along with two younger siblings, a brother and sister.

I’d like to go back to the rye which had been left behind, which my mother had swept out from under the oven. My mother had sewn little sacks and poured the grain into them and then wound yarn (the kind that they use in villages to weave quilts) around them and hung them in the pantry. Then as the famine was raging in full force (sometime in April-May) and the activists came and took the grain from the sacks, my mother barely escaped a beating for having hidden the grain in the sacks.

I remember that at home the only food products which were still available were sugar beets. Then when the supply of beets ended, everyone began to starve. Then my father went to the Molotov state farm in the village of Lemeshivka of the Yahotyn district, and then my mother followed him, because at the state farm they served a meal and some bread. That’s how my father and mother fed themselves as well as us at home, if they managed to bring us something to eat. My father and mother would go to the state farm to get work while we three [siblings] stayed at home and waited till the evening for our parents to come home, although we did not just sit around. We strolled about the homestead, on the road and in the untilled field and grazed in the grass. The thistle flowers were particularly tasty; they grew in the untilled field and were a bit sweet. I remember one time we woke up in the morning, our parents were not home already, I stood up on my legs but could not walk because my legs were swollen, so my younger brother and sister would gather and bring home knot-weed and other herbs and weeds up to the evening hour, until our parents came home and brought (maybe fifty grams of) bread and some soup. The next day we woke up, my legs felt a little better and my mother took me with her to the state farm and walked me over to the cafeteria and said, “stay around here and watch as the girls who work in the cafeteria pour out the slop – maybe you’ll find something to eat.” And that’s how I fed myself till the evening, near the refuse pit (it’s true I was not the only one there, there were many of us, both young and old). After [sometime at] that refuse pit, the swelling in my legs subsided and I began to walk.

Near our home there was an untilled field and we would go there to graze, thistle flowers grew there. When I recall now what I saw that day, chills run down my spine. I came to the untilled field, picked some thistle flowers and as I began eating them, a woman with a child in her arms – they were both exhausted – was walking nearby and asked me to pick a few thistle flowers for her. I picked a few [thistles] and brought them over to her and sat beside her and we set out to eat the thistle flowers. But by then she was already so depleted that she had no strength to clean the thistle, so I helped her, while the infant cried with such screams unlike anything resembling that of a regular child (I cannot properly convey the sound). After we sat around for a bit, this woman, with her child in her arms, managed, with great difficulty, to stand up and headed towards the state farm.

That evening, when my parents were already home from work, my father told my mother that when he was going home from work, he saw a dead woman and a child, still alive, beside her. My mother began to cry after my father’s story.

And one other time, my father travelled to the city of Pyriatyn to the bazaar to exchange clothes for produce. When he returned from the bazaar with nothing, he began describing to my mother an incident at the bazaar where one man had bought a bowl of soup and sat down to eat, and when he was finishing his soup, he discovered the tip of a child’s finger.

According to what the elderly said, 975 people in our village died of hunger in 1933. And I remember the village was a terrible and virtually uninhabited wasteland covered in weeds.

In 1933, the authorities organized grave diggers for the dead. For this type of work, they were paid one loaf of bread per day. The grave diggers would bury 10-12 dead people in one pit. They would transport the cadavers by wagon to the designated area and dump the bodies into the pit, regardless of what the bodies were dressed in, and then cover the bodies with dirt.

Today, at the cemetery, that row of graves dating back to 1933 is different from the other ones, i.e. the graves from back then don’t exist – they have collapsed.

If you might be interested in additional information, please write to the following address: Poltava Oblast, Pyriatyn district, the village of Smotryky, Postal Code 315428. Horb, Ivan Fylymonovych. Goodbye.

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