Letter from Ms. K. Hrebenichenko to Volodymyr Maniak, 4 January 1989

Regarding events in Kharkiv and vicinity as well as Tetiiv, Kyiv oblast

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I was 18 years old in that horrible, tragic year of 1933. The year of the artificial famine in Ukraine. At that time, I was a student of the Industrial-Technological Trade School of Public Food Consumption in Kharkiv, the capital of Ukraine (until 1935). During recess, one of the students deciphered the title of the store “Torgsin” (Trade with Foreigners [syndicate]), in which desirable products were sold for gold. This is how he did it:

T – (orgsin) ovarishchi [Friends]

O – (sterehaites) [Beware]

R – (abochye) [The Working Class, Laborers]

G – (ybnut) [Those That Are Perishing]

S – (talin) [Stalin]

I – (sstrebliaet) [The One Who Destroys]

N – (arod) [The People, Nation]

For doing this, that student (I don’t remember his name) was arrested and shot. I do remember the informant’s name – Leheza, Nina. After completing trade school during the 1936/37 academic year, she enrolled at T. H. Shevchenko University in Kyiv. Perhaps she is still alive…. All of the students decided to stay away from her.

A ration card system existed at that time. Our trade school had its own store for bread only. We were assigned to cafeteria №11, which was located on the same street as the trade school (“Staromoskovska” Street).

In that cafeteria we were fed only soy products: for breakfast – basic soy food; for lunch – soy soup; for supper – again basic soy food….

Our dormitory was on “Kholodna Hora” (Cold Hill). One time I saw a bloated [starving] man at the last [streetcar] stop near the square. He was lying down and not moving, but still alive. People walked past him in silence. And when I told my sister about this incident, her husband (a military man), a major in the tank corps, told me I could be shot for such a statement. In my reply to him, I said: “Go ahead and shoot [me], but this won’t change the situation.” During the summer holidays of 1933, we students were dispatched to a state farm 30 kilometers from Kharkiv to collect the harvest, since the local workers had no strength to do so. At the state farm’s cafeteria we were given lentil soup, but there were no lentils in the soup, only chaff from the lentils…. The bread was partially made of millet. That’s how we were fed during the 1st month. The second month of the holidays we spent at home.

That year I happened to be staying in the town of Tetiiv, Kyiv oblast, at my sister Handzia’s place. She kept feeding her 3-year-old daughter soup with starch noodles. That’s what saved them.

The situation was even worse in the villages: the people ate pancakes made out of sunflower cores, grinding them into flour.

There were incidents where debilitated parents were eaten by their sons and daughters…and vice versa – children who were feeble and emaciated by hunger were eaten by their parents….

Those peasants who had a cow were slightly better off, but there were not many of those.

In 1932–1933, the harvest was not bad. But Stalin, along with his retinue and supporters, confiscated all the grain from Ukraine, leaving the peasants with nothing for nourishment, and nothing for sowing….

The famine was man-made and artificial. And there is no forgiveness from the people to the late Stalin and his supporters. And Kaganovich, even though he is 95 years of age, should stand trial. He is the one who siphoned the bread and all of the grain from Ukraine above and beyond the [economic] plan which every kolhospnyk (collective farmer) had to fulfill!

There was a folk ditty at that time:

“Oh thank you Stalin the Georgian,

Who dressed us up in rubber.”

There was a rumor going around that taxes were being collected in support of Georgia at the expense of Ukraine during the days of Stalinism….

I am now 73 years old. I am a pensioner, an invalid of the 2nd Class, and a participant of the Great Patriotic War of 1941–1945. My pension is all of 55 karbovantsi. I have various jubilee awards, as well as 5 medals and one Great Patriotic War Order, 2nd Class, from the Fastiv “Raivoeinkomat” (Regional War Committee).

I was an underground partisan in the village of Denekhivka, in Tetiiv region of Kyiv oblast, in the “Iskra” (Spark) Platoon at the Shevchenko [Industrial] Plant, where I worked as a teacher of German. After the war, I completed the Gorky Pedagogical Institute in Kyiv (Faculty of Foreign Languages – Department of English).

Respectfully Yours for Your great effort, which is so necessary for the Ukrainian people, a much-suffering people….

4/I-89