Letter from Nastia Trenbach to Volodymyr Maniak, ca 13 December 1988

Regarding events in Kryva Ruda, Semenivka raion, Poltava oblast

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Honorable Volodymyr Antonovych

I read in the 9 December issue of the newspaper S[ilski] Visti about the 1933 famine year. I read the article with great distress.

My recollections will not qualify for the Memorial Book, because I will not be able to write a reply to those questions which were in the newspaper. I am writing to you, so that you would read my recollections. From my parents they took bread and bags of dried pumpkin mixed with nightshades (various flowering plants and herbs) and all kinds of dried produce. And then afterwards they demanded grain, but there was no grain, so they chased and drove my parents out of the house, and thus began a terrible life of cold and starvation. My older sisters went to the Donbas and till this day I cannot find them; no results at all. My mother was walking from work and fell and died soon afterwards, and my father died as well. I wound up alone, hungry and cold. There was an orphanage [in our village] but they did not admit me, because my father had been chased out of the house.

My aunt let me inside her house. They were hungry as well. The authorities took the grain, dug up holes in the house and demolished the oven searching for grain, but there was no grain anymore. My aunt would sprinkle rotten chaff from the threshing floor through a sieve and bake chaff cookies. We had an elderly teacher by the name of Bahno, Maria Petrovna, who had also taught my father. She came and said to me, “Nastinka, come to school. In the cafeteria they serve a bowl of soy soup.” I began going to school. We kids were not like the ones today – happy and noisy. Back then, the kids were swollen, others were gaunt and depleted, and they waited impatiently for recess, during which there was lunch in the cafeteria. The teacher, Maria Petrovna, held dearly her miserable and hungry students, and did whatever she could so that her students would not die of hunger. She would stand by the door as we exited the cafeteria, called us by name, and asked if he/she had eaten well enough. Whoever said that he/she had not had enough to eat, the teacher would turn that student back and tell the cook to serve him/her a second helping. Thanks to this teacher and this cook and this bowl of lean soy soup, I survived and the rest of my life I recall [this] with tears in my eyes. During summer vacation we students would go to work by collecting boll weevils off of beets. For a day’s work we would earn a tablespoon of molasses, and then pick green, unripe apricots and spread the molasses on the apricots and eat [the fruit], and this is how we fed ourselves during childhood.

The swollen workers cultivating the beets barely managed to move from place to place. And there were cadavers lying in the ploughed fields, some of which were picked up and driven to the cemetery, while the hoes were left behind to lie around. Two old men were designated, along with the supply of two horses, to collect the dead and transport them to the cemetery where the dead were thrown into a pit until it was filled and then the pit was covered up. One woman’s six children died in the house in one day. There was no one to dig the pit. Already swollen, she went by herself to the cemetery and dug up a small ditch so that she could [at least] lay them down, because she couldn’t manage to dig any deeper. She transported the bodies into the ditch, covered up the ditch so that only the heads of the children were visible, and then she collapsed and also died. I saw people who screamed for food until they died.

When the rye ripened, people had rye in their gardens and backyards, but the authorities forbade the starving people who were dying of hunger to reap the ears [of grain] for nourishment. I still can’t comprehend for what purpose this was done. And when someone managed to acquire bread, people were already so depleted by hunger that they would die from the bread as well. The starving, emaciated intestines would rupture when a person would satisfy his/her appetite. There is a lot that can be written, but there isn’t enough strength to write about this famine. I want to write that I and my peers – I am 65 years old already – lived through a difficult life. Our childhood was characterized by starvation, while our youth was characterized by war and the difficult post-war years.

May today’s young people never have to experience the year of 1933. May they never experience war and terrible, post-war years. Let there always be sun and peace on earth, let there be good fortune in the entire world and for all people on earth.

Respectfully yours,

Nastia Vasylovna Trenbach

Poltava oblast, Semenivka raion, Kryva Ruda village, 23 Stepova Street.

I thank all of you, who remembered the unfortunate people who perished of starvation.

Honorable Volodymyr Antonovych.

I greet You and your family and your work colleagues with the upcoming New 1989 year.

From all my heart I wish You

The warmth of the sun

The goodwill of mankind

The tenderness of the birch,

And loyalty from people and friends

As well as a clear sky

And good bread!

So that the sun shines for you

And may grief stay afar

And may your life

Always be splendid!

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