Letter from Petro Minenko to Volodymyr Maniak, 19 December 1988

Regarding events in Velyka Vilshanka, Vasylkiv raion, Kyiv oblast

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Having read the newspaper article “Famine: 33” by the Doctor of Historical Studies, Professor S. Kulchytsky, I decided to describe my recollections of this famine.

The famine in Ukraine was created deliberately. This was enhanced by [the policy of] collectivization in the villages. Initially, the authorities explained the reasons for, and promoted the significance of, agricultural cooperatives as well as their advantages over private, individual farming. However, few peasants consented to join the kolhosp. In general, parents were illiterate, while not all children in a family had elementary education or [underwent] a literacy campaign program. In the village, no one subscribed to newspapers except the teacher and a few of the more literate people.

The peasants were simply afraid to find themselves without a piece of bread and to die of hunger. Families were large, with 5-10 and more members. Peasants did everything possible to guarantee the welfare of their family in the form of food, clothing and footwear. The stores had nothing except salt, kerosene and tobacco. In the summer, the children for the most part walked around barefoot and half-naked. In the winter, one pair of boots was shared by 2-3 children. As one child would come home from school, another child would then put on the [same pair of] boots to attend school during the second shift, or to roam the streets.

Collectivized farms had not yet managed to demonstrate their practical advantage over individual farming.

The authorities had begun instilling pressure on the peasants to submit applications for membership in the kolhosp.

Basically, this is what the authorities would do: they would impose a heavy “prodrazverstka” [the policy of surplus agricultural appropriation] on the peasants. If a peasant fulfilled the “prodrazverstka” quotas, but not by using those grain cultures which had been singled out by official decree, then he would be levied with other cultures, so that he could not fulfill the order. As a result, such a peasant would be labeled a “tverdozdavets” (an individual charged with fulfilling a strict quota), whose property and livestock would then undergo an inventory and would subsequently be sold at public auction. The family would be hurdled into one house or deported into exile, in order to perish. Regarding acts of sabotage during the grain collection process by party officials and farmers – such individuals did not engage in sabotage on purpose. On the contrary, what really occurred was the heavy, unmatchable “prodrazverstka.”

And this is the reason why repressions were carried out against those officials and peasants who had not yet joined the kolhosp and had not met the grain collection quota.

Non-centralized assistance for the starving existed only on the kolhosp level. Thus, the entire surplus of grain, potatoes and vegetables was allotted for human consumption for the benefit of those who agreed to work in the kolhosp. Once a day they were given a lunch and 500–600 g of bread. Those physically capable – worked, and then brought home a portion of the acquired bread and gave it to those who were unable to work in the fields.

Regarding those villages which were blacklisted (registered on the“black board”) – there were no such cases in our district. There were no specific data known to me regarding the number of those who perished by hunger in the villages. Those who perished comprised 50–60% of the overall population.

In many cases, entire families died out, or between one-half to one-third [of a family]. There was no material assistance provided from the city for the benefit of a village’s sowing campaign in the spring of 1933. However, the leadership on the oblast and district levels did offer assistance and moral support.

I would like to describe what occurred in the village which I lived in at that time, having worked on my father’s farmstead – the village of Sushchany in the Kaharlyk district of Kyiv oblast. Petro Omelianovych Minenko, born 1916.

The village was small and consisted of 400-450 households. My parents were farmers and had no education. The family comprised 9 children, including my father, mother, grandfather, my grandfather’s sister and my father’s sister.

In 1932-1933 I was a student in the 7th grade in the neighboring village of Myrivtsi, 4 kilometers from our village. Every day I would walk to school to attend the second shift. There were 10 of us who walked to school. Then the spring of 1933 arrived. Due to malnourishment my legs began to swell up and as a result I was compelled to leave school. I was an excellent student and served as the head of the student council. The director of the school summoned me and asked me why I stopped going to school. I explained that there was nothing to eat at home and showed him my swollen legs. He wrote a directive to the head of the kolhosp requesting that I be served lunch in the kolhosp’s canteen. I began to have lunch in the kolhosp’s canteen, and that’s how I completed 7 grades.

When people began to die of hunger in the spring of 1933, the whole situation was horrific. People would gather at funerals, cry, and mourn. The kolhosp made the coffins and designated people to dig separate pits for each individual [corpse]. A priest would carry out a burial ceremony. And later on when people began to die en masse – 10 to 15 individuals per day – they would be buried without coffins all in one pit, regardless of how many perished in one day.

Four members of our family died. One neighbour’s family consisted of 7 individuals, but only the mother and two children survived. This woman took her children to Kyiv, left them on the street and inserted a note in one of their pockets, listing their names and where they were from.

When the famine ended, this woman was able to locate the whereabouts of her children. One son died in an orphanage, while the other, older son survived. The woman took him home. The son grew up and had a family of his own. The family of my father’s sister comprised 6 members and they all perished. The farmstead was incorporated into the kolhosp.

Respectfully yours.

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December 19, 1988