№ 211

Grigory Denisovich Kuchmii

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To the writer Comrade V.A. Maniak:

I am Grigory Denisovich Kuchmiy, born 1919, from the Village of Yabluchne, Velyka Pysarivka raion, Sumy oblast.

In 1933, I was almost 15 years of age, and therefore I was a witness to how thousands of people died from hunger, and by a great coincidence, I remained alive. The Holodomor killed even entire streets, where even to this day, those places remain unbuilt.

People’s fear of death by hunger began back in 1931, when they began to dekulakize people who were good stewards of the land, or to be more precise, we were robbed by the poorest, who did not want to work, and many were plundered only for the reason that they did not want to be forced to join the collective farm. Our village was divided into homesteads of *sotnyas* [Cossack regiments], where our sotnya was number five, and where in our sotnya there were some zealous activists. There was Grigory Arestovich Kovalenko, already deceased (nicknamed “Arestonchik” on the street), and Yavdokha Komar (nicknamed Koshilka [Wallet] on the street), who were lacking in pity and were masters of brutality, who grabbed and threw out of their homes not only adults but totally innocent children, right on the snow, in whatever they happened to be wearing then. And then they settled those who had been evicted into the poorest of huts, five families in each, and if any of the dekulakized had a son living separately, and he let his father come spend the night, then he was dubbed a “kulak enabler,” and he was put on a kind of special registry by these activists and the local authorities.

In 1932, there was a very good harvest everywhere, but there was ruthless seizure of it from the population by those activists, where no one paid any attention to the pleas of the adults and the tears of the children. They went around with metal prods and found and seized not only grain but seeds in bundles, and also took baked bread from the shelves, down to the last loaf.

People went into the winter of 1932-1933 without the slightest bit of food reserves, and each person now saw and felt the onset of a merciless death by famine. They began to grind chaff in mortars in order to have something to bake and eat.

The most severe and widespread famine began in the spring of 1933, when people were terribly bloated; they would grab hold of any object in order not to fall when moving. They crawled out to their cherry tree gardens and gathered last-year’s cherry stones and ate them hungrily.

They began to slaughter dogs, cats, groundhogs (gophers); they caught tadpoles in the pond; and they slaughtered other people’s and their own children and ate them.

An order was issued that if in the collective farm, anyone’s livestock died for any reason, then it was chopped up, kerosene was poured on it, and it was reported as a die-off from Siberian anthrax, so that people would not dig it up and eat it. And I personally, swollen and weak, with great difficulty, dug up from a pit the hindquarters of a horse which with great strictness had been condemned as a die-off from Siberian anthrax; I cut off the hind leg and dragged it home in a sack and we boiled it and ate it. And not only did we not get sick from Siberian anthrax; on the contrary, we grew stronger and I have lived already 70 years.

People began to die of the famine en-masse; first the corpses were wrapped in *ryadna* (home-made blankets) by those who were left alive and as best they could, they hauled them to the cemetery and threw them on top of the corpses not yet buried, because they were in no state physically to dig a pit. But subsequently, few brought the dead to the cemetery, and entire deceased families were left in the place where they had died.

For an unknown reason, at a state farm about 5-7 km from our village, some sugar beets remained in a large area, where everyone who was able went with sacks and axes and chopped them out of the ground and brought them home. A great number of people died there in the field in the winter, and their corpses were found only later, during harvesting of the wheat, where I drove a horse-drawn mower.

At the collective farm, we were given 200 grams of bread each and some very watery broth, only for those who went to work; there was only a small percentage of flour in the bread; the rest of it was what was left after pressing oil and beet seeds. A lot of hungry children sat and lay around the kitchens in anticipation of perhaps getting something to eat, but nothing came, and some died on the spot, and many head for home and were in no condition to crawl across a ditch, and died right there in a ditch, and if someone from among the relatives of that child who died was still alive, they did not take an interest and did not look for him.

The famine reached even those very ardent activists who had dekulakized people. Some of those activists, after Stalin’s article, “Dizzy from Success”[[1]](#footnote-1) explained to their own bloated children that Soviet authority had been about to be established, but now something had gone wrong; and they determined this because there was no one left for them to rob, and they had to work on equal terms.

The masses of dead bodies began to decompose, and a brigade was appointed by the local government and given extra rations to dig large pits at the cemetery, wearing gas masks. With the help of metal hooks, they dragged the corpses from the houses and the weeds and pulled them onto carts to the pits. The former ardent activist Grigory Arestovich (“Aristonchik”) Kovalenko landed in that burial brigade and loaded onto the carts not only the dead, but the living who still felt alive, and one woman who still physically felt well; he forcibly threw her into a trunk and closed it, and she died in it, only because of his hatred for her. Many people learned about this, and those who were able began to hide from his eyes. I personally was weak and extremely bloated, and the skin was already peeling from my legs, but I took a tarp and spent days in the weeds in our garden in order not to land alive in the pit, and there I lost consciousness. I remained alive thanks only to the fact that my mother came from the state farm, dragged me in the tarp into the house and gave me a ration of bread she had saved at work, and then after a while, another, and after a while boiled some sugar beets she had brought and gave me a little of the beet processing byproduct to drink, which she poured from tubs intended for catching pests in the sugar beet fields. This was how I survived. The time had come for the ears of rye to grow ripe in the gardens, and all the people cut down these ears to dry and grind in mortars in order to boil some broth. But this did not go by quietly; there were sturdy, high watchtowers built in the field to ensure that people couldn’t cut down the ears. A lot of rangers were deployed, and instructions were given to them to go around to the cottages and confiscate the pots of brew, and put the guilty parties for several days in a jail adapted from the bell tower of the church. My mother was jailed there by order and petition of that very same G.A. Kovalenko (“Aristonchik”), and a lot of people wound up in the church jail; they didn’t come home and no one knew where they were.

Many people went to the field, crushed the ears and ate the grain so hungrily that their stomachs exploded and they died on the spot.

The time for grain-harvesting came, the soup began to be boiled thicker at the collective farm, and a kilogram of bread was given to each person per day. People began to have a human appearance, and by autumn of 1933, although they were very poorly dressed and shod and in very poor living conditions, they began to dance with tears of joy, to sing and to praise the father and teacher, the beloved and wise leader of ours, Joseph Stalin, who with his decree crushed many millions of people with famine in Ukraine, and in the short period from 1937-1938, murdered tens of millions of a great and glorious people.

My life is already coming to the finish line, although there are people older than I. However, I cannot overstate my happiness that although it is a difficult process, history is being restored, and the hunger of 1933, the likes of which the world has never known, will be placed there.

It is said that you must live your life so as not to be ashamed of how you lived, but no, this is not meant to be for our resentful people since the entire journey of our lives was spent in fear and poverty, and in relentless and unpaid labor. We cannot complain about lives; God forbid that Stalinism return.

I think that what I have written about the past will hardly be illuminated in history, yet while I have not described everything in the disturbing past, what I’ve written is how it was, for I was a witness and a martyr of that time.

I urge you to forgive me for the extensiveness of what is written and not to leave me without an answer.

Respectfully, [Signature] G.D. Kuchmiy

My address:

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1. Published on March 2, 1930, in Pravda, Stalin's article titled “Dizzy from Success: Concerning Issues of the Collective-Farm Movement” called for a halt to the collectivization program, saying it had been carried out with excessive zeal and "excesses" needed to be corrected. [Translator’s note] [↑](#footnote-ref-1)