

“1933: Holodomor”

I was almost 8 years old. I clearly remember the hungry winter of 1933.

At that time our family lived in Kyiv on Stepan Khalturyn Street. My father worked as a security guard / night watchman, my older brother worked as a locksmith in a factory, my sister was going to school and my mother and I were at home as I was not yet in school.

We would receive a very small ration of bread. I remember there were days when we didn't have anything to eat at all. There was a jug of crystal salt in our kitchen and we would suck on the flakes of salt and wash them down with water. I was the youngest and remember crying constantly. I would fall asleep, wake up and cry again, asking for food.

There was a bakery across the street from our building. From our window we could see people carrying bread out of the store with “dovisky” (small pieces of bread), back then bread was sold by weight. A group of children would be standing around the entrance to the bakery hoping that someone would give them some bread scraps.

My mother couldn't stand listening to my constant crying and sent me out to stand outside the bakery, but no one gave me any bread, - there were so many of us there.

I now understand how my poor mother's heart must have been breaking watching my small little figure standing there with an outstretched hand.

On Zhylyans'ka Street there was a dairy. I would go there with my sister to buy whey [liquid left over after the production of cheese]. It was very dark and cold outside and there was a huge line up. I would take the whey in a carafe and then carry it around during the day, selling whey by the cup to passers by on the street. This was how I could make a little money. With this earned money I ran to the corner of Karavayevs'ka Street to a little market where I could purchase a thin slice of bread - so thin that you could practically see through it. At the pharmacy we would buy little tablets - pills called ‘sen sen’, I don't know what they were meant for, but at least they eased our hunger pangs a little. I will never forget those ‘Sensen’ pills. (Sennae extract?)

We did not witness what was going on in the villages that year, but we did hear some very horrific stories. The worst was about people in the villages being so hungry that they would lose their minds and eat their own children. In the cities people would at least get some small rations of food, - the factory and school cafeterias served lunches, but in the villages everything was taken away from the villagers and they were left with nothing to eat. People from villages walked to the cities and just died by the city walls, we saw dead bodies being picked up from the streets.

One day I saw a girl lying on the sidewalk of our street. She was dying of hunger. People were prying her mouth and teeth open with a knife and trying to pour in some soup. Villagers were bringing their children to the cities and leaving them next to buildings, hoping that someone would take them to a shelter or orphanage because orphanages would not accept children from the parents. One morning we went outside and saw two small children sitting on the porch of our building. The older boy's name was Hryts` and the little girl was very young. My mother and our neighbour took these two children to the orphanage, which was on Batanichna Street at the time.

We had a cat, who we loved very much. Our neighbour stole our cat and ate her.

We heard the adults talking about horrible atrocities, and as a result, the children would have awful nightmares. I often had a recurring dream, in which my sister and I were running away from people who wanted to slaughter us. I would wake up terrified and keep everyone from sleeping.

We lived very modestly. We sold everything from our house that we could sell.

On St. Nicholas day a man from the neighbouring building asked my father to remove a plywood partition in his apartment. He had just acquired that room not too long ago. My parents were not especially devout people, but they did not work on religious holidays, keeping to pre-revolution traditions. However, hunger "is not a relative" [Ukrainian saying], so my father went to work that day. While he was dismantling the partition, a gold coin fell out. He took the money for himself as it didn't belong to the owner of the apartment. Who knows how long the coin had been there. It was a cold winter day, the sun shone brightly,

and the snow was glistening. I was outside and saw my father approaching carrying some wrapped packages. They contained groceries which he bought with the gold coin at the Torgsin - a hard currency store. Those who had gold did not go hungry. I remember sugar, butter and a bag of white flour appearing on our table. It was like a fairytale. From that day on, Father promised himself never to work again on a religious holiday, especially on St. Nicholas day. We always said later, that St. Nicholas Day was father's special holiday.

We somehow survived till spring. The weather became warm and dry. I was sitting in the sun in front of our building and saw my mother approaching. She was carrying, like a sun, a big round loaf of white bread (arnautka). Nowadays, no one bakes bread as big and beautiful as that. That day, unexpectedly, new bread stores and bakeries had opened overnight all over the city. The stores were full of freshly baked inexpensive bread, which you could buy without rations. There were cases of starving people eating too much fresh bread at once and dying as a result.

A specified amount of bread per person, was given out at any one time. My mother and I went a second time to get bread. The lineups were very long, but everyone waited patiently, 10 people at a time were let into the store. Those who had already bought bread walked out and let others in. I stood on the sidewalk and waited for my mother. A man walked out with a big loaf of bread and wanted to give me a large piece of bread (dovisok), but I did not accept it, telling him that my mother was buying some.

Many years have passed, but to this day, I still cry thinking about those recollections.

We also survived another very hungry winter in 1942 during the German occupation of Kyiv, but that is another story.

Many people of my generation, having lived through the same horrific events of those times, know and greatly cherish the value of a single piece of bread.

With Respect,

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