THE GREAT FAMINE
A Personification of Suffering
by
Donald N. Miller

This year marks the 75th Anniversary of the *Great Famine* in Ukraine, one of the harshest and cruelest tragedies in modern history. In commemoration of this national event in 1932-1933, Ukrainian President Victor Yushchenko recently described it as "genocide" against the Ukrainian people, made a number of political pronouncements and called for a public remembrance. In his speeches President Yushchenko has passionately and consistently referred to the famine as *Holodomor* (literally, death by hunger).

The famine resulted from Stalin's collectivization program and ruthless grain requisitions, but the world is divided on whether it was intentional. Some allege Stalin used mass starvation as a weapon to eradicate the Ukrainian peasantry, while others claim it was simply due to natural disasters (drought and the like), inefficiencies of the collective farming system and mass agricultural mismanagement on the part of the Soviets. Not everyone is comfortable with the term "genocide". Even in Ukraine itself there is some opposition to the term, especially among the pro-Russian members of parliament. The MPs argue that the word "tragedy" is a better choice of words. But the fact remains that millions of Ukrainians, including many Germans, died as a result of the famine – a quarter of Ukraine's population at the time, according to some estimates. Yet one of the darkest chapters in Ukraine's recent history remains largely unknown to most of the world and in the minds of many is considered to be unimportant. Like the disingenuous question raised at a public forum at Penn State University several years ago when the documentary film *Harvest of Despair* was shown, namely, "Who the hell are these people anyway?"

Пам'ять про голодомор 1932-33 років пробила товщу всілякних фальсифікацій та заборон і заволала на весь світ. І світ здригнувся від нечуваного в історії людства злочину, ім'я якому — геноцид протн українського народу.

Найретельніші пошуки у фондах партійних архівів зведеної, сумарної цифри людських втрат по республіці внаслідок голоду не увінчалися успіхом. А може їх знищили, остерігаючись людського суду, суду історії. Бо ж рахунок ішов на мільйони.

But to those of us whose family members went through that hell, it is very personal. Although I was aware of the national tragedy, my first real encounter with the reality of the horror of this hunger occurred in 1993 while on my first *Volhynian Village Adventure Tour.* I had been in the State Archives in Zhitomir. As I was leaving the building my eye caught sight of a silhouetted picture of a ragged woman and child -- on a journey to no where, it seemed -- posted on the bulletin board. When I inquired as to the nature of the picture, my English-speaking guide said it was a reference to the *Great Famine* of 1932/33 that was perpetrated on the Ukrainian people. I assumed it was posted in commemoration of the 60th Anniversary of the famine. Later I received a fuller translation of the Ukrainian copy underneath the picture. I was deeply touched by the picture, especially the look of despair on woman's face, reflected in what I presumed to be a futile search for food. I was touched because I belong to one of those families. Before I left that day I asked for a copy of the picture and pondered it for many days. Still today I am struck by that mother's face of despair. Somehow it reminds me of my aunt Amelia Streichert from Protowka (Neuheim) in Russian Volhynia. When the famine was at its worst, her husband, Hermann Streichert made his way to a neighboring village in Polish Volhynia to garner some basic staples for the family, where he was brutally murdered on Easter Sunday 1933.

Selma Utotschkin, the couple's eldest daughter describes it this way: "Life got more difficult day by day. It was almost impossible to fed a family of six children. The hunger extended unmercifully into every family. In order to survive, my mother wrote to her brother, Samuel Miller, who had immigrated to Camrose, AB, Canada in 1927. He sent us $5.00. My father traded the money for merchandise (bacon, rice, sugar, noodles and so forth) at the nearest market. The $5.00 saved us from hunger for a short time. We are very grateful for the alms given to our family, but it was not enough. Besides, we had to break off relations with my mother's family, because the Government regarded any association with people outside Russia as hostile. In order to survive my father found work for my two eldest brothers, David and Benjamin, in Jsjaskaw, a small town about 35 km from the Polish border. They worked on a farm for some rich people. Ben herded cows and David watched over their three small children. The family had plenty to eat. My father often went there to visit them and bring back food for us. Just before Easter he went again, the third or fourth time, and they loaded him down with various food products – flour, bacon and sausage, but mostly flour. There was another man with him. His last name was Rick. I don't remember his first name. The two had gotten their foodstuffs and made their way to the train station in Jsjaslaw. It was a small station. The train only stopped there for a few minutes. There was hardly enough time to get on the train. Because my father was loaded down, he had difficulty getting on the train and was left behind, while his friend made it. This meant he had to stay some place overnight. He wasn't sure where to go or what to do, when a 15-year old Polish boy approached him. The boy said that his parents lived nearby and he could spend the night there.

During the night, while my father was sleeping, he was murdered with an ax and his body disposed of.

"When Rick returned to Protowka and told my mother what had happened, she assumed her husband would take the next train and be home in a day or two. When he didn't return in a week, she became worried and said, 'I wonder what happened to my man. We will die of starvation if he doesn't come soon.' In the meantime, we were almost climbing the walls out of hunger. My mother reported the delay to the authorities, but they refused to do anything about it. They thought she was just covering for her husband who had fled the area. Finally, my mother decided to go to the village and see for herself what happened. At the railroad station she saw an announcement about some men who had recently been murdered. When she went to the police station to find out if her husband was among them, they showed her a pile of clothes and said, 'If your husband's belongings are here, then he was murdered.' Sure enough, there she found the heavy fur coat that Grandpa Mueller had loaned him for the trip, his pants, shoes and a woolen cap he had purchased along the way. There was still blood on the cap and a hole where the ax had cut through the cap into his skull. When my mother saw the coat and cap and realized what had happened, she fainted. By then my father was buried already. As the facts unfolded, my mother learned that the man who killed her husband was the father of the 15-year old boy. When the authorities searched the man's place, they found a hole in the barn under a manure pile, which contained the bodies of a dozen or more murdered men. They all suffered the same fate as my father. When the man was questioned as to how he could do such an evil thing, he mumbled, 'What are they to me?'"

I had heard this story many times as a young boy growing up in northern Canada and often wondered how my aunt had survived in far away Russia. Little did I realize that the famine continued for some time, stretching on into 1934/35. Then in 2000 while doing some research at the *North American Baptist Heritage Commission* in Sioux Falls, SD for my book, *In the Midst of Wolves,* I came across a letter that my aunt had written to Eduard Wuerch, the well-known Volhynian pastor from the mother church in Neudorf. Wuerch had immigrated to Saskatoon, SK, Canada in 1928. The letter was dated December 4, 1934. It was a desperate cry for help. It read, "I have been left alone, a suffering widow, with six orphans. My future looks very bleak. We look every day into the eyes of death. If we don't get help soon, we will all die of hunger. The faithful Brother (Reinhold, a nephew) Wuerch from the Baptist Church in Rudkowski Futter is now gone and we have nowhere else to turn. Please have mercy on me and my poor orphans. Even if I can't pay you back, God will." Stapled to the letter was a receipt of a money order of $5.00 and a letter from Wuerch, lamenting the fact that he couldn't give more. It included a list of three people who contributed one dollar each to the cause and two dollars from Wuerch. The money was sent to my aunt by foreign express through an agency called *Torgsin* that the *German*

Baptist Missionary Society used to transfer funds to Russia, but whether she ever received the money is not known.

Shortly after Amelia wrote the letter, she and some 60 starving, emaciated women, mostly widows whose husbands had been exiled to the North, stormed the storage bin on the collective farm in attempt to scoop up a few buckets of grain for flour. On January 3, 1935 Amelia was arrested by the NKVD (secret police) and imprisoned in the Dopr prison in Zhitomir. She was accused and charged under Article 54-10 for systematically carrying out German Fascist agitation and of having connections with contraband revolutionary elements (foreigners). Ironically, nothing was said about her convergence on the storage bin. On February 13, 1935 her case was closed due to the lack of evidence and she was set free (*Zhitomir State Archives, Case 14470, Fond 1513*). Within days she and her family, together with about half of the remaining villagers in Protowka were informed that they would be resettled to Eastern Ukraine. About a week later they were taken by sleigh to the railroad station in Zhitomir where they were loaded up in a cattle car. Two weeks down the road they were dumped in the Donetz region. Amelia and her six children were settled in the village of Schachawo in a house that had been left empty by a family that had starved to death. In June 1941 when Hitler invaded Russia, the family was evacuated to the Ural Mts., where they worked in a *Trudarmee* (work force in the Soviet Union). Amelia died in Belojorka in northern Kazahkstan, near Omsk, in 1980 at 85 years of age.

My aunt is long since gone, but her face, personified in this simple picture of the woman and her son, remains deeply etched in my heart. It is time for us to remember the victims of the famine and the terrible price they paid for the right to live. It is also time for the international community to recognize the *Great Famine* for what it is. As someone has said, “There were two large-scale holocausts in 20th century Europe, one of them implemented by the Nazis against the Jews, and another one by the Bolsheviks against the Ukrainians. One of them is well known, broadly covered and largely recognized, while the other is almost unknown, uncovered and, until recently, unrecognized”.

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The memory of the Great Famine of 1932-33 has survived many falsifications and denials and has overwhelmed the world. The world was shaken when it learned about this awful unbelievable crime against the Ukrainian people, namely *genocide.* A most thorough search of the Party archives as to the total number of human lives lost in the Ukrainian Republic as a result of the Great Famine has been unsuccessful. Perhaps the records were destroyed for fear of human

judgment, the judgment of all of humanity. For it was a matter of millions of wasted lives.

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