

Bridgeport News

Local Resident Shares Memories of Famine Genocide

By Larissa Lytwyn

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Erna Derevianka was barely more than a toddler when Soviet dictator Josef Stalin instituted a plan that brought her family to near starvation during the next few years.

Speaking about the events today, the 85-year-old Bridgeport resident said the memories are still so painfully vivid, sleeplessness lingers for days.

Derevianka is among the survivors Ukrainians statewide will recognize at the state capitol Saturday, the 75th anniversary of Ukraine's communist-fueled famine genocide.

It is a time formally known as the Holodomor, defined as "death by hunger."

A central piece of Stalin's five-year New Economic Plan (NEP), a communist policy created to assure Russia's geopolitical supremacy, was agricultural collectivization. Created in 1928, the full impact of the plan wasn't felt until the early-to-mid-1930s.

At the time NEP was implemented, the majority of Ukraine's population was comprised of peasant farmers. These farmers were forced to yield their entire harvests to Soviet authority. If they were caught attempting to use any of their produce to feed themselves or their families, they were executed on sight or transferred to work camps in Siberia.

As a result, an estimated 10 million Ukrainians died of starvation.

Derevianka was born in Belarus, a country neighboring Russia. Her mother, a native of Kyiv, Ukraine, had traveled to Belarus to care for an ailing aunt. It was in Belarus she met Derevianka's father and started a family. When Derevianka was about nine, however, her mother became "homesick" and the family decided to return to Kyiv.

Since communication was tightly controlled within Ukraine's borders, Derevianka and her parents were shocked when they arrived in the Kyiv region, a land of plenty now desolate and economically desperate. In lieu of the bustling, family-operated farms Derevianka's mother remembered were collectivist villages managed by communist authority.

Derevianka and her family settled with her maternal aunt. Times became increasingly desperate. Derevianka's aunt struggled to provide enough milk to nurse her newborn baby. On more than one occasion, Derevianka said, "The baby pulled blood from her breast." The infant soon died.

Although Derevianka's aunt lived on less than 20 acres of land, the Soviets believed she owned enough to belong to the upper landownership class. Further, although she had lived in the Kyiv region for four generations, her German ancestry made her even more of a threat, Derevianka said.

As a result, Derevianka said, it wasn't long before the family was separated. Derevianka, her younger sister and her parents were transported west to the Kharkiv village. There they settled with another peasant family.

Derevianka's aunt was deported east.

Derevianka's parents struggled to get jobs at the collective farm in Kharkiv. The only "pay" on these collective farms was a daily ration of half a pound of grain, not nearly enough to feed two adults and growing children.

At Kharkiv, Derevianka remembered an older woman who behaved erratically, often wandering the village nude during the summers. Derevianka learned the woman's children had recently starved to death. "It was rumored she made holodets (a Ukrainian delicacy made of pork) from her children's bodies to keep herself alive," Derevianka said. "People pitied her or ignored her."

Derevianka usually spent her days trying to gather edible weeds to boil and eat. Her sister, she said, was often so weak she spent most of her time sleeping. "Her belly was swollen with hunger," Derevianka said. She also hunted the grounds for hedgehogs. "Putting a lot of salt on the [hedgehog meat] made it taste like pork," she said.

Derevianka also stole grain, lying flat on her stomach and dragging herself close to the ground so she wouldn't be seen.

After about a year, the quotas were eased and farmers were allowed greater rations. Following World War II, Derevianka and her family lived in Germany in a Displaced Persons (DP) camp. One hot summer day, Derevianka was preparing to swim with a friend when her friend stripped to her swimsuit and revealed several long, vicious scars across her back.

When Derevianka asked her friend what happened, her friend replied that one day during the height of the famine in 1932, a man, crazed with hunger, attacked her. "There was so much blood [my friend] fainted," Derevianka said.

Derevianka and her husband moved from Germany to Bridgeport in 1961, she said, to seek better opportunities for her family. Although several decades have passed since the famine, Derevianka said it is a story few know. The ones who are still alive who survived it were very young when the famine happened. "It's important for the world to know what happened," Derevianka said. At times, the events seem so horrific, "people think you've lost your mind and don't believe you."

Derevianka is now largely confined to her bed. She said she feels thankful her mind is still strong. "I never thought I would live to these years," she said. "God must be helping me."