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The New York Times
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December 19, 2007

75 Years Later, Survivor Helps Commemorate Ukrainian Famine

By PETER DUFFY



Since 1954, Daria Schulha Kira has lived in the East Village, the heart of the Ukrainian community in New York. She came to America after surviving the 1930s famine in her native country.

Seventy-five years ago, in a small village in eastern Ukraine, Daria Schulha Kira recalls huddling with her three siblings as Communist Party officials ransacked their home looking for grain. "Your government needs your food," she remembers the armed men shouting. "Then they took iron bars and poked in the walls and the floors looking for anything they could find."

But they didn't have any food. Ms. Kira, now 85 and living in an apartment on East Houston Street in Manhattan, was living through one of the worst periods of Stalin's brutal reign in the Soviet Union.

It is widely recognized that the Ukrainian famine of 1932-33, which killed 3 million to 6 million people, resulted from the Soviet government's policies, said Alexander J. Motyl, a political science professor at Rutgers University who has written extensively on 20th-century Ukraine. Without the government requisitioning grain at levels far beyond the capacity of the Ukrainian peasantry to fulfill, Professor Motyl said, there would have been no famine.

Even when the scale of the suffering became apparent, Soviet officials continued to insist that unattainable grain quotas be met, refused to open up grain reserves or ask for international aid, and prohibited starving peasants from moving into cities or other Soviet republics.

The New York Ukrainian community, long centered in the East Village, has begun commemorating the 75th anniversary of what it calls the Holodomor, or death by hunger. For the start of a year of activities, scores of Ukrainian-Americans marched in November from St. George Ukrainian Catholic Church on East Seventh Street to St. Patrick's Cathedral in Midtown for a requiem Mass.

Few famine survivors with clear memories of the tragedy remain, so the bright-eyed Ms. Kira has necessarily become an object of much attention. On Nov. 27, she was the only survivor who appeared at a conference of scholars and diplomats at the United Nations. Ms. Kira said she relished her role. "I want the world to know what happened," she said.

This is also a pressing mission of the Ukrainian government, which is dedicating 2008 to compiling testimonies, supporting scholarly research, restoring burial places and planning a national museum. Ukraine's president, Viktor A. Yushchenko, has spoken of the importance of recovering memories of an event that had long been denied by the Soviet Union.

Yushchenko's government is also leading a drive to have the United Nations declare the famine an act of genocide, seeing it as part of Stalin's continuing effort to destroy any trace of Ukrainian national feeling. While some scholars question a genocide designation by arguing that Stalin was singling out the peasant class rather than Ukrainians or that the famine also touched other areas of the Soviet Union, few are as vociferous in their opposition as the current Russian government. In a Nov. 19 statement released by the Foreign Ministry, it said Ukraine was engaged in "a one-sided distortion of history to suit modern opportunist political-ideological directives."

Surrounded by dolls dressed in Ukrainian folk costumes, Orthodox Christian icons and old family photographs in her apartment, Ms. Kira said that Stalin "wanted to destroy Ukraine." As proof, she added that Russians were resettled in the homes of Ukrainians who had died in her village, Tajky. She told a harrowing story of being orphaned before the famine and then struggling to survive its deprivations with her siblings, the oldest of whom was a 17-year-old brother. "We went into the forest and searched for mushrooms," she said. "We ate every kind of mushroom, except for the poisonous ones. We even ate the ones that were full of bugs. Thank God for mushrooms."

She said she remembers sneaking into "golden" wheat fields to steal a few stalks, which she would thresh into flour with a small millstone hidden at home. It was an act that could have resulted in jail time or even execution.

In a 1986 book about the famine, "The Harvest of Sorrow," Robert Conquest tells of a woman sentenced to 10 years of forced labor for gathering 70 pounds of wheat stalks for her family. Ms. Kira ruefully recalled when the combines arrived to cull the 1932 wheat harvest. After the machines completed the job, "everyone who could walk" picked through the bare fields for anything that might have been left behind.

And death was everywhere, she said. "I remember the dead bodies looked like skeletons with big stomachs," she said. Cannibalism was not unknown. She told a macabre tale about a neighbor who ate her dead children and talked to their bones in hopes that they would return to life. Young people were afraid to walk into town for fear of being abducted by people crazed by hunger, she said.

Ms. Kira was lucky enough to survive the famine. A decade later, she was forced to confront the Nazis, who took her to a labor camp in Austria. She eventually made it to the United States, settling in the East Village in 1954. She vows never to leave the still-thriving pocket of Ukrainian churches, social clubs and restaurants.

The neighborhood is happy to have her. "She holds a special place in the community's heart," said Tamara Olexy, executive director of the Ukrainian Congress Committee of America, located on Second Avenue. "She's able to bring a human face to a tragedy that is so little known throughout the world."

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