

Spreading the story of Holodomor, the Ukrainian genocide



DARLENE POLACHIC, SASKATOON STARPHOENIX

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From left, Nadia Prokopchuk and George Zerebecky (co-writers of the Holodomor educational unit); Mary Ann

Between 1932 and 1933, millions of people in Ukraine died as a result of Josef Stalin's strategy of enforced starvation. It was genocide on a massive scale, a tragedy known as Holodomor, the Ukrainian word for prolonged, agonizing murder by starvation.

Holly Paluck, a principal in the Regina Catholic School system and chair of the provincial Holodomor Awareness and Education committee, says: "Holodomor was huge. Anywhere from three and a half to seven million people in Ukraine died of starvation engineered by Stalin who bragged to Winston Churchill that 10 million had died.

"The Ukrainian peasant class owned the agricultural land and Stalin saw them as the social base of Ukrainian nationalism and as such, enemies of the state. He created an artificial famine (not caused by crop failure) to destroy the people who dared oppose his government's plan for collectivization and industrialization."

Stalin sent "urban workers" to expropriate property, organize collectives, and supervise out-going grain shipments. He imposed excessive crop quotas, confiscated the entire harvest in Ukrainian fields, as well as food supplies in peoples' homes. Gathering food in one's own field or hiding produce was illegal, even though Soviet bins were bulging and they were selling Ukrainian grain to Germany and other countries. Desperate for food, peasants ate rats, tree bark and leaves to survive. The children died first, then the men, and finally the women. Between June and July of 1933, 1,167 people died per hour, 19 per minute. One-third were children under 10.

"Stalin's collectivization robbed Ukrainian people of much more than food," Paluck says. "It was an assault, a systematic cultural, physical and spiritual genocide that attempted to destroy everything, including

Ukrainian peoples' faith and religion. The aim was total demoralization. Their churches and sacred places were desecrated. The Soviets said: 'God is not here. We are greater than God. We stomp on God.' Religious items people took comfort from in dark times were taken away. Religion and faith were forced underground."

The Ukrainian Holodomor came to David Katzman's attention when he was on a speaking tour in Saskatchewan and Manitoba on behalf of FAST (Fighting anti-Semitism Together). Katzman, a member of the Saskatoon Jewish community, has been part of the national FAST organization for some years. It was started in 2004 by a couple appalled by the rise in anti-Semitic and other forms of racism and discrimination.

In an effort to raise awareness among young people, a curriculum initiative called Voices Into Action was put together. It is aimed at high school students and looks at human rights, genocide, understanding prejudice and discrimination, immigration, and personal action.

"I spoke in various places about the Jewish Holocaust and the genocides in Bosnia, Armenia and Rwanda," Katzman says, "but people were saying: 'What about Holodomor?'"

At his urging, Voices Into Action approached the Ukrainian Canadian Congress about writing a chapter on the epic Ukrainian tragedy for inclusion in the curriculum section on genocide.

Nadia Prokopchuk, a retired educator who is a member of the provincial Holodomor Education Committee, and fellow educator George Zerebecky were invited to co-write the unit. They strove to put Holodomor into the context of their target audience, high school students who know very little about Ukrainian or Russian history and the interplay between the two.

Prokopchuk and Zerebecky employed the current educational approach of inquiry-based learning, posing questions about this time in history, asking how something this horrible could happen without anyone knowing. The curriculum takes students to riveting interviews with eyewitness survivors of Holodomor, and gives a historical snapshot and timeline. All the information is backed up by links to further research sources.

“The world has only recently started getting reliable information about this period in history,” David Katzman says. “Post-1991 and the break up of the Soviet Union, files that were locked up for decades are being opened and translated. They contain such appalling information they are sometimes difficult to read. But it’s important for people to know about this. If we forget the past, we’re bound to repeat it in the future.”

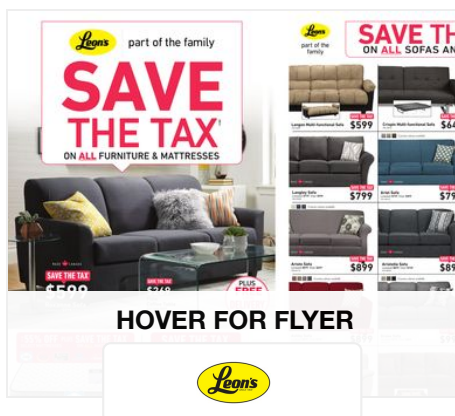
To raise awareness and educate about Holodomor, a 450 square foot, fully accessible bus has been fitted out as a Holodomor Mobile Classroom that will tour across Canada. It will be in Saskatchewan from September 23 to October 15 taking the story of Death by Hunger to high schools and any other venues that wish to host it. The exhibit is sponsored by the Canadian Ukrainian Foundation, an arm of the national Ukrainian Canadian Congress.

To book the bus, contact Holly Paluck through the Ukrainian Canadian Congress at 306-652-5850 or 306-501-9700.

For other information, visit the Voices Into Action website:

www.voicesintoaction.ca (<http://www.voicesintoaction.ca>). The website is free, and deals with 23 different issues in recent history related to the rise in racism and xenophobia.

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