

As It Happened: Contemporaneous Edmonton Press Reports About Ukraine's Great Famine

Although the Soviet government tried to cover up the famine that lay waste to the Ukrainian countryside in 1932–33, it proved impossible to completely suppress the truth about what is now known as the Holodomor from getting out. Below are just a few locally generated news stories concerning the situation in the U.S.S.R. that appeared in the Edmonton press in 1933, when deaths from starvation in Soviet Ukraine reached their height. Far more numerous and extensive accounts were published in many of the daily newspapers across Canada, some of them copy from wire service agencies and others written by Canadian, American, and British journalists who were in the Soviet Union during the years of the Great Famine. Additional first-hand reports came from official visitors and tourists, like a progressive-minded American medical doctor, W. J. Robinson, whose largely critical and cogently written book about his trip, *Soviet Russia as I Saw It*, was serialized in the *Vancouver Sun* and then in the *Edmonton Bulletin* between January and March 1933. Further details were conveyed in articles, interviews, and public presentations by returning engineers, technical experts, factory workers, and manual laborers who spent time employed in the U.S.S.R. and afterwards described the havoc and hardship being wreaked by the forced collectivization of agriculture and the rush to industrialize the country at breakneck speed. In short, a surprising amount of accurate and insightful information about the famine resulting from the Kremlin's policies was available to Canadians from Canadian sources. Nevertheless, it was at the same time often contradicted and obfuscated by denials, half-truths, deliberate misinformation and even partial admissions—creating a confused picture abroad of the unfolding catastrophe that was claiming millions of innocent lives.

While food shortages were known to be a problem throughout much of the Soviet Union even before the start of the First Five-Year Plan, there is a growing body of compelling evidence that the Great Hunger of 1932–33 in Ukrainian areas had a unique and distinctly genocidal character. Not only were Soviet Ukraine's borders sealed off by the military and targeted districts surrounded by troops to prevent people from escaping, brigades of fanatical Communist activists were sent into rural communities to strip them of everything edible while starving peasant families were denied access to confiscated and stockpiled food supplies. Even already collectivized farms were often subjected to these harsh measures. This, after hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian farmers branded by the government as “kulaks” had been sent into exile to Siberia and the far north to work as virtual slaves in the Soviet forestry, mining, and construction industries—large numbers of whom died of exposure, starvation, overwork, and mistreatment, others being shot on the flimsiest of pretexts.

In reading the items below, it is important to remember that the individuals who wrote them or shared their stories did not have the benefit of an overview or of historical hindsight to fully understand the cause and scale of the suffering that they were addressing in their remarks. Furthermore, any references to “Russia” do not necessarily mean Russia proper (i.e., the Russian SFSR) and in the instances below apply to Soviet-occupied Ukraine, or the Ukrainian SSR.

The first of these excerpts from the Edmonton press, a letter to the editor, was written partly in response to an unprecedented development in the neighboring province of Saskatchewan. There, at the initiative of a highly respected opposition Liberal MLA, a special all-party session was held in the Regina legislature on 15 March 1933 to discuss the alarming news that was coming from the Soviet Union.

Soviets Refused Wheat

In your edition of March 16 I noticed an article ... that the Saskatchewan legislature considers offering shipments of wheat to Soviet Russia to help the starving population. Attention of the Saskatchewan government was drawn by the hon. member of Rosthern, Sask., Dr. J. M. Ulrich [*sic* — should be Uhrich], who stated that Mennonites in Rosthern district are getting 700 to 800 letters weekly from Soviet Russia asking for help.

In the fall of 1932, the Ukra[i]nian Canadians received thousands of letters from Ukraine (granary of Europe before the great war) asking for help as the conditions in Soviet Russia are deplorable and bread is considered a luxury. It is remarkable that they did not ask for money, but for grain and flour.

We tried to make arrangements to collect 400,000 to 500,000 bushels of wheat to be shipped to Ukraine, but the Soviet government through their charitable institutions refused to accept our offer, stating: “In view of satisfactory harvest this year, proposal is not necessary in the absence of real need.”

Yours, W.S. Plawiuk
8232-101 st.

“The Letter Box,” *Edmonton Journal*, 20 March 1933, p. 4.

At the special sitting of the Saskatchewan legislature, letters from those afflicted by the famine were read and a resolution was discussed that called on the federal government to negotiate a shipment of ten to twenty million bushels of wheat “to the starving people of Russia” on a barter basis—which, of course, never happened. Unlike the situation in the 1921–23 famine, the Kremlin did not allow for outside aid to come in to relieve the distress of the starving, though it did permit people to send money to their struggling relatives. These funds, however, were directed to the hard currency reserves that the Soviet state treasury was in urgent need of in order to pay for Stalin’s ambitious Five-Year Plan.

A second letter, whose contents were relayed in an Edmonton daily twelve days later, provided a heart-wrenching picture of one family’s increasingly desperate plight and plea for assistance, which they realized would probably never come or reach them in time to prevent their deaths by starvation. Although the location the letter was sent from is not given, it seems most likely to have originated from rural Soviet Ukraine. The recipient was careful to not give away the name of the district, lest the secret police hunt down and punish their stricken family members.

RUSSIANS FORCE ALBERTAN FOLK TO FACE STARVATION

Pitiful Letter of Lacombe Victim is Vivid Word Picture

**Tears at Heartstrings of Relatives Living on Farm—Intolerable Conditions
Are Portrayed**

Tearing at the heart strings of relatives living on a farm in the Lacombe district, a letter smuggled out of Russia by way of Germany paints a vivid picture of life for the masses under the rule of the Soviet.

For obvious reasons the recipient of the letter does not wish his name to be made public.

“If it became known that they had got this letter through to us it would work a hardship on my brothers and sisters still there, but this is a translation of the letter as I received it and I am ready to give an affidavit as to its authenticity,” he writes *The Bulletin*.

He gives the name of the district in the U.S.S.R. where the writer of the letter lives, but asks that this also be omitted for fear it would serve as a clue an[d] bring the dreadful Ogpu down in force on people whose condition is already intolerably wretched.

The letter was written in February but it has only just reached its destination after being smuggled across the Russian border into Germany.

“Not one word has been altered, this is a literal translation,” said the Lacombe man to *The Bulletin*. “I know it tells the truth. It is from my own people, and I would like to tell others how intolerable conditions are in Russia under the rule of the Soviet.”

Here it is.

BROTHER DYING

“Your brother will be dying one of these days, as he has been on a prison island for the past four months and no one knows why he was arrested. He is very sick and is sinking rapidly.

“There is a great need all over this country. Due to poor crops people are in need of bread everywhere and they have nothing to buy it with. Things are very high priced here, with bread costing 50 rubles for 10 pounds, sunflower oil is at 130 rubles per bottle, potatoes a ruble a pound and chickens costing 15 rubles.

“Things are getting worse here all the time and all we have to depend on is the help we can get abroad. I feel sorry to have to ask you for assistance, but it hurts to hunger. Please send us a few dollars if you can or a parcel of food.

SAT AND WEPT

“You, my beloved one, when we received your letter we all sat down and began to weep. We have gone through terrible times here, for the past two or three months. Many men are being laid off here all the time. One factory here that used to employ 1,800 people, now employ[s] only 400. In another factory in a nearby town, 5,300 workers have been laid off and in Moscow somewhere around 98,000 men have been off, so you can well imagine how many people are on the point of starvation.

“The following is true, my brother. Eight women and two men were shot here after standing trial because they killed people and made sausage out of their flesh.

Things look dreary here.

“The little bread [i.e., grain] we received for our labor during the summer we had to return to the government because the grain plan failed. I want to mention also that the men here had to go to work after the harvest and thresh straw and chaff by hand, and the government took the little grain they managed to shake out. We dare not rebel against this treatment, nor raise our voice in protest.

GETS WORSE

“No doubt you do not have to worry about starving as we do. It is far worse here than during the great 1921 famine. There are very few who have bread to eat, and we have nothing at all to eat any more.

“Emily gave us some flour when she received some money from Canada and now she has nothing left for herself and we can’t help each other out any more. We can not get any more bread and haven’t a potato in our home or a handful of flour left in the house. Fat is out of the question and corn is not to be had at any of the bazaars any more. We would be satisfied if we could get oil cakes, but we can’t even have those.

“Pauline has enough to do her for two weeks yet, but what will she do then? Brother Jacob hasn’t enough food to last him and his ten children for any more than two weeks. Your other brothers are all right so far as they are teaching in schools, so I guess Pauline and Emily will be the first of us who must starve. We know you can not help us all, and we are at a loss to know what will happen to us.

HOPE FOR HELP

“Perhaps some help will arrive from you. You are our only hope. I can hardly write any more because of my tears. Oh, brother, how hard it is to have to go hungry, and hunger is reigning over us now. I am longing for a piece of bread. You cannot imagine or believe how things are with us here. If only Spring were here so that we could eat some green things. God protect you from hunger and Bolshevism.”

In conclusion the letter said:

“For 15 long years the Bolsheviks have been managing the richest parts of this country.

[“]Red blood suckers have deceived these poor people here, promising them a sunny life. One five year plan after another, and what is the result? We have them right here before us; thousands of starving people, while many are being shot, although they are only poor innocent people. Thousands are in prisons and thousands more have been exiled to the far north woods where they are sent out in the morning without a bite to eat, with their bodies and legs covered with only old rags. Evenings they return after a long day of ceaseless toil and are placed back in their prisons. They know nothing of a real holiday, or of resting on Sunday. The only thing they can carry in peace is a silent prayer in their hearts.”

The Edmonton Bulletin, 1 April 1933, p. 3. Bolded text in the original.

The money sent from abroad had to be spent in special stores called Torgsins, which only accepted hard currency, gold, and jewels in exchange for goods. Food obtained in this way kept some lucky families from starving to death but could not help the millions affected by the famine.

Another tragic story was relayed by someone fortunate enough to escape from Soviet Ukraine just as the most devastating effects of the famine were being felt. Perehonivka is a village in Kirovohrad oblast, roughly 180 kilometers west of the provincial capital of Kropyvnytskyi (formerly Kirovohrad city), in central, Right-Bank Ukraine. The population of Perehonivka in 1972 was 4,631, and the factory referred to was undoubtedly the village’s sugar beet processing plant. The mention of Ukrainians being “unwilling to work collectively” relates to the resistance of many Ukrainian peasants to forced collectivization by the Soviet state, which the Bolshevik leadership punished through mass deportations to the Gulag, summary arrests, torture and executions, and the targetted use of hunger.

Says Ukrainians Die of Starvation

Armed Force Is Continued to Maintain Discipline

Winnipeg, June [n.d.].—A tale of suffering and starvation in Ukraine, once a granary of the world, was told by Mrs. Sophie Slusarenko, who passed through Winnipeg, bound for Edmonton, from her former home, Perehoniwka, in the Soviet Ukraine. She is joining her husband, who came to Canada some five years ago.

“There is not enough bread or potatoes in Ukraine, let alone other bare necessities. Last year 600 people in my village died of starvation,” Mrs. Slusarenko said.

Food troubles in the Ukraine, she said, started in the fall of 1931, when the nationalization of agriculture was started on a large scale. Riots in her town had been quelled by armed force. Since then conditions have grown rapidly worse. There are not enough cows to provide milk for the children and most of the horses have been eaten in the last two years by the starving people.

A crop failure is again anticipated this year. Failures are due principally to the unwillingness of the Ukrainian population to work collectively, and the lack of informed and skilled labor to handle modern farm machinery.

Workers in a sugar factory in the town are slightly better off than the agrarians, but even in the factory, armed force is continued to maintain discipline. Criticism of the existing Soviet order, or any grumbling, is invariably followed by swift removal to the Slovetzky [*sic*, i.e., Solovets] island, or to Archangel, from where there is no return.

Edmonton Journal, 7 June 1933, p. 9. Versions of the same story were published in the *Winnipeg Tribune* on 19 May, the *Brandon Daily Sun* on 31 May, and the (Windsor) *Border Cities Star* on 3 June.

Although some peasants slaughtered their livestock upon being forced to join a collective farm rather than surrendering it or allowing it to simply starve for lack of fodder, many peasants in fact killed the few animals that they had for food after the government confiscated virtually all of their grain, leaving them with nothing to sow or survive on.

Yet another gripping account of how starvation was ravaging Ukraine came from a woman who made a pilgrimage to her former homeland while on a trip to Europe and the Middle East. Even though the peak of mass starvation had passed by the time of her visit, the effects of hunger continued to take a toll on Ukrainian citizens, especially children, the aged, and the infirm. Some of her comments reflect the influence of the narrative promoted by Soviet authorities, who sought to shift blame for the hunger and divert attention away from it to a few of the accomplishments that the Stalinist dictatorship had managed to achieve at an enormous human cost. What the Kremlin was chiefly interested in was not providing help to the starving, but to gain access to Western credit so as to be able to underwrite the purchase of machinery and foreign expertise that were essential to the realization of the industrial objectives of the Five-Year Plan.

Marching War Legions, Starving Children City Woman's Picture of Soviet Russia

Mrs. H. Satanove Brings Vivid Picture of Former Homeland

“RUSSIA SUCCESS”

Views Outlook for Great Nation as Not All Dark

ATTENDS CONGRESS

As she stood talking to a banker in Romna, Russia, [namely, Romny, in Sumy oblast of northeastern Ukraine] she saw something beneath her heel, she turned, looked down It was a child—dead of starvation.

So—while Red legions march in preparation for war—Russia’s children starve, according to Mrs. H. Satanove, 10158 114 st., who has just returned from a tour of the Soviet and Palestine. She left Edmonton in February.

Mrs. Satanove draws a vivid picture of an unsmiling Russian people, a people grown hardened to horror, to starvation, a people struggling along a difficult path in the greatest social experiment of the times; a people not impotent, but a strong and powerful nation who will succeed in finding the way from the morass of despair into which they have been led by unscrupulous leaders, by succeeding revolutions, by suspicionhatred.

“Russia is a success, but her people have been caught in the wheels of their own progress. Without the credit she must have, she sees her people starving, deprived of necessities Lack of credit leaves her helpless. It is a tragic picture,” Mrs. Satanove says. “And all the while preparations for war go on . . [sic] Preparations for a great conflict.

“There is no compulsory military service in Russia, the Soviet has a more subtle scheme. People outside the army may starve: 13 bodies, victims of starvation, were thrown into one pit at Murgorod [most likely Myrhorod, in the Poltava region of central Ukraine] but those who enter the army are provided with better fare.

“Disease is rampant. I saw heartrending scenes. People I met and told that Canadians had white bread and cake, believed me crazy Such things were impossible, they said.”

Mrs. Satanove saw Russia as tourist, but also a returning Russian, for she was born in the Russia of the czars, leaving that country as a married woman in 1911. To identify herself to friends, she carried a picture of herself as a girl, which she showed them in Russia.

One pleasure during her recent tour was that of attending a great Jewish congress at Prague. During her trip she visited Poland, Russia, Germany, Italy and Palestine. At the congress she heard Nahaim Sokolow [Nahum Sokolow], president of the Zionist movement, and Lord Melchett. Some 6,000 people attended the gathering.

Striking contrast between conditions in Russia and those in Palestine was stressed by Mrs. Satanove.

“In Russia most houses are electrically lighted. Talk of war is on every tongue and starvation is everywhere. People subsist on a fare of corn meal and water,” she says. “In Palestine, people lead more of an Arcadian life. There are not telephones, no radios. People have a simple life and are happy. Palestine, indeed, was the only country I visited in which there was no talk of war.

“Palestine is attractive,” Mrs. Satanove says and then reverting to Russia, her old homeland .[. . .]“and oh, but my heart bleeds for Russia . . . my Russia. Still, I am sure that this great struggling giant is progressing from darkness and fear and misery into the light of freedom and prosperity.”

Edmonton Journal, 5 October 1933, p. 1.

The historic World Zionist Congress that Mrs. Satanove attended opened in Prague on 21 August 1933. The militarization of Soviet society that she observed was initiated by the Bolshevik government to prepare for an ostensible invasion of the Soviet Union by Western powers—the fear of such an imminent threat being greatly exaggerated in order to unite the Soviet population and to rationalize the suffering imposed on civilians while the military, police forces, senior party leaders and members of the Communist apparatus were all provisioned with food. In truth, it was the Kremlin that declared “war” on the peasantry and anyone critical of the regime, pitting the city against the countryside, workers against peasants, the military and police against civilians, the young against the old, and the state against all who had been associated with the former Czarist order or left-wing opposition to the Bolsheviks. Meanwhile, Moscow presented itself as a proponent of demilitarization and a champion of world peace even as it embarked on a major build-up of the Red Army while at the same time accusing Western industrialists of ramping up arms production in anticipation of another European conflict. Germany, which ideologically posed the greatest danger to the U.S.S.R. from the West, only began to re-arm itself after the Nazis consolidated their hold on power and established Hitler’s dictatorship following the elections of November 1933—months after the famine had subsided.

A further contribution about the famine was made to the Edmonton press by Lawyer Peter J. Lazarowich (1901-1983), a graduate of the University of Alberta who was admitted to the Alberta bar in October 1932. He then left for a year to pursue his studies at the Ukrainian Free University in Prague, where he was able to closely follow the developments in both Soviet Ukraine and in the Western Ukrainian lands then under oppressive Polish and Romanian rule. He provided a well-informed summary of how the famine was affecting Communist Ukraine, and a grim picture of its toll.

Famine in the Ukraine

By P. J. Lazarowich, Edmonton

While the press of Europe, and the American continent is, quite properly, devoting much space to Germany’s treatment of the Jews, it is surprising that so very little interest or sympathy is shown in the matter of the terrible famine now raging in the Ukraine, a country which forms a part of the U.S.S.R. and contains over 32,000,000 of Ukrainian population.

That a state of famine exists in the Ukraine since the beginning of the year 1932 has now been conclusively established in spite of the official denials of the Russian Soviet government. News of the appalling conditions in the Ukraine has reached the civilized world through foreign press correspondents, refugees, and countless letters written by the Ukrainians and others to their friends and relatives in Canada and other parts of the world.

The London Times of June 24, 1933, published a letter signed by Alexander F. Kerensky, the former prime minister of Russia, in which he endeavors to bring to the attention of the civilized world the fact that a terrible famine is raging in certain parts of Russia, particularly in the Ukraine and the northern Caucasus. In part he says:

“The last letter that I received from the Ukraine tells me that the people are now eating carcasses of horses, cats and even human flesh. . . . In the northern Caucasus the population is reduced to eating the bark of trees. To give some conception of the former wealth of these provinces I will quote Lenin himself: “In the Ukraine they feed pigs on wheat, while in the Caucasus the peasants selling milk wash out their glasses with the milk itself. We have in the Ukraine, the Caucasus and Siberia amazing wealth.” (Works of Lenin, Russ., ed. Vol. 25, p. 300). Mr. Kerensky then concludes:

“This amazing wealth after the realization of the five-year-plan with its forced collectivization has become a famine without parallel. Yet up to today, world opinion remains passive in front of a calamity without precedent in the world’s history.—Yours, etc.”

During the spring and summer of 1933 the famine had reached such enormous proportions involving the fate of millions of people that even the friends of the Soviets like Walter Duranty, correspondent of the New York Times, are no longer able to conceal the terrible conditions prevailing in the Ukraine.

Nevertheless, and in spite of the conditions the Russian Soviet government relentlessly continued to collect and export wheat and other grains out of Ukraine. According to the report of the W. Sanford statistical service, Winnipeg, of March 29, 1933, during the period between August 4, 1932, and March 23, 1933, the Soviet government shipped 17,312,000 bushels of wheat out of Ukraine.

Up to the present the Russian Soviet government has consistently denied all reports of famine in the Ukraine and refused to allow any direct investigation into the existing conditions by an impartial committee thereby precluding all possibilities of assistance to the famine-stricken area.

In the summer of 1932 Canadians of Ukrainian descent appealed to the Canadian Red Cross society to investigate the possibility of sending material assistance from Canada to Ukraine. The request was submitted to the league of Red Cross societies at Geneva, which in due course communicated with the Red Cross and Red Crescent societies of the U.S.S. R. Regarding the matter. The following is the reply received and transmitted to the Canadian Red Cross society, Toronto:

“I have just received your letter of September 9, regarding the desire expressed by a group of Ukrainians to send part of their harvest to compatriots.

“While expressing my most sincere thanks for the interest you have been good enough to take in this matter, I have the honor to inform you that in view of the satisfactory harvest this year, the executive committee of the Alliance of Red Cross and Red Crescent societies of the U.S.S.R. believes that the carrying out of the Canadian citizens’ proposal is not necessary in the absence of real need.”

But in spite of these official denials the facts of the most terrible famine in history can no longer be concealed. The whole world is aware of it. There are a number of people in every civilized country today, journalists, statesmen, tourists, students, peasants, who have returned or fled from Ukraine recently and who confirm the reports of the famine in all its appalling details. There are several people in this city of Edmonton whose names and addresses are in the possession of the undersigned who have arrived from the Ukraine in the course of the last few months and who may be interviewed and the facts ascertained. There are also many people in this city of Edmonton who are in possession of private letters from parents, brothers, sisters, relatives and friends which disclose the true conditions in the Ukraine in all their horror.

Among the facts disclosed the following are the most striking:

1. All the livestock and poultry has practically disappeared from the Ukraine, having either died from lack of feed or was slaughtered by the starving population.

2. Dogs and cats have also disappeared. Most of them were killed and eaten by the population. Even rats and mice are eagerly sought for as food.

3. The people eat grass, weeds, bark of certain trees and insects.

4. Recently cannibalism has become rampant. Even dead bodies are exhumed and devoured. The old, the infirm and the defenceless are secretly murdered and devoured. Mothers are afraid to send their children any distance away from home for fear that they may be murdered and devoured by the famished hordes which roam the countryside.

5. The death rate has assumed hitherto unknown proportions. In many villages 20 to 30 persons die every day. Many of the villages have lost two-thirds of the population. The dead are often left unburied until the bodies decompose. When the burials take place it is in large, common graves generally 20 to 30 bodies in each grave.

It is difficult to estimate the loss of human life but the consensus of opinion is that it will exceed the figures reached during the famine in 1921-22, which was officially placed at about 5,000,000 people.

In spite of these facts the Russian Soviet government has not ceased from the forcible requisition of grain in the Ukraine. On the contrary, according to press reports ("Pravda" (Leningrad) No. 181) a large army of red officials has invaded the country under the personal direction of Postyshev and is draining the last drop of blood from the dying population of Ukraine.

In view of all of the above facts it appears that the Russian Soviet government is deliberately determined to starve most of the population of Ukraine in order to beat it into complete submission to the principles of Communism which the Ukrainian peasant masses have hitherto vigorously resisted and repudiated.

According to recent reports from the Ukrainian bureau in London, England, all the Ukrainian organizations in western Europe have initiated a movement for the establishment of an international relief committee for Ukraine for the purpose of devising ways and means of ... sending immediate relief to the famine stricken areas of Ukraine. Ukrainian representatives from Bukowina (Rumania) and eastern Galicia (Poland) have recently met representatives of the leading humanitarian institutions in London and steps have been taken toward the establishment of a relief committee in London composed of both English and Ukrainian representatives. Similar efforts are being made at Geneva in co-operation with the appropriate organs of the League of Nations.

Canadians of Ukrainian descent have also formed such relief committees. Furthermore they are conducting a Canada-wide action of vigorous protest against the inhuman policy of the Russian Soviet government in the Ukraine. They earnestly hope to arouse the civilized world from its apathy toward the impending disaster of the Ukrainian nation and to enlist its co-operation in the effort to send relief to the famished area.

Edmonton Journal, 25 October 1933, p. 4.

Pavel Postyshev (1887–1939), characterized as “draining the last drop of blood from the dying population of Ukraine,” was Stalin’s special representative despatched to Ukraine in January 1933, along with thousands of political cadres charged with ruthlessly implementing Moscow’s policies. As part of his mission to crush all opposition to collectivization, he oversaw a mass purge of some 100,000 members of the Communist Party of the Ukrainian SSR, the decimation of the Ukrainian intelligentsia, including cultural and spiritual leaders, and the inauguration of an intense program of Russification. All of these measures were designed to quell any Ukrainian aspirations for greater autonomy, or independence, neither of which posed an immediate or at that time credible threat to the Kremlin’s hegemony, and even though the Soviet Constitution formally provided for the right of republics to secede from the union.

On the same day that the *Edmonton Journal* featured the article by Lazarowich, it ran a second story on page fourteen that made reference to starvation and cannibalism in Ukraine. Titled “**Family City Rabbi Now in New York / Travel From Ukraine, Is Silent on Conditions There, Fears Censors,**” it reported on the arrival at Ellis Island of the family of Rabbi Isaac Haft of the Beth Israel Synagogue on 95th Street in Edmonton. Rabbi Haft’s wife and five children were joining him from the town of Poltava in central Ukraine after a lengthy separation, it having taken three years and a considerable sum of money even by today’s standards to be able to finally leave the U.S.S.R. Asked about “events and conditions in his native land,” Haft was described as speaking English fluently and largely without an accent, but was “reserved and almost uncommunicative” in his response:

“I know nothing of the conditions of starvation and cannibalism talked about here,” he replied to a query regarding these things. “I have been away for five years and have not been in touch with things at home. My family have never mentioned these things for the obvious reason that all letters are censored and to have done so would have injured their prospects of leaving the country.”

When asked further if he would say anything of the condition of people in Ukraine, he said “You will understand me when I tell you that I have relatives there yet and every word spoken here is reported there. If I talked too much my relatives would have to pay for it in all probability. In any case I know nothing of these troubles you refer to.”

The family was delayed for a time in New York because of the ill health of one of the daughters and spent two days en route to Edmonton hosted by friends in Winnipeg. There, they were interviewed for a page 3 story published in the *Winnipeg Tribune* on 3 November under the heading “**Rabbi’s Family Wins 6-Year Fight to Get Out of Russia.**” The article revealed that the rabbi had come to Canada in 1927, and “Ever since his arrival, his family have been trying to join him.”

The family was never ill-treated . . . and they never wanted for food and clothing, because, as they said, “you can buy anything in Russia if you have the money,” and the rabbi has been sending them money from Canada every month. They have been living in the Russian town of Poltava.

Red tape, bureaucracy and officialdom make up the difficulties for intending emigrants, it was explained. The government is strongly opposed to anyone leaving the country, and sets as many difficulties in their way as possible. Railroad tickets, passports, and other necessities, are made expensive and difficult to obtain. Passports cost them the equivalent of \$1,500 in Canadian money.

The news that the Hafts had reached Winnipeg was noted in the *Edmonton Journal* as well as the *Saskatoon Star Phoenix* on 4 November, indicating the interest being generated by their imminent arrival. That the family was never treated badly by authorities is not entirely surprising, given that the Soviet government obviously wanted the hard currency that Rabbi Haft sent each month to support his wife and children, not to mention the extortionate sums they had to pay for their passports. The fact that they were Jews also probably worked in their favour, as the Bolsheviks were not particularly eager to unnecessarily provoke the Jewish diaspora in North America because of the negative publicity it would undoubtedly stir up.

While their train was passing through Saskatoon, the Hafts were interviewed by a reporter with the *Saskatoon Star-Phoenix*, whose article, “**BREAD SHORTAGE IN SOVIET RUSSIA / Main Cause of Discontent, Wife of Edmonton Rabbi Says On Arrival Here,**” appeared on 8 November. In it, Mrs. Haft is said to have made several curious and somewhat confusing remarks about the conditions the family had left behind.

Bread, Mrs. Haft stated, had always been the staple [i.e., staple] food of Russians of all classes. Other foods were supplementary and not considered as foods. Accordingly with the Communist wheat policy limiting the amount of wheat for internal consumption, bread had to be rationed and the older people particularly found themselves on the verge of starvation in many places because of their inability to adapt their appetites to other forms of food.

With the exception of bread, the Communist system of distribution worked perfectly, the immigrant continued. Prices were much the same as in Canada although slightly higher in some commodities.

Freedom of religion was allowed all people except members of the Communist party who were expected to renounce all religion. Education was given all children. The children liked school. But in the school anti-religion was taught. There was a wide freedom of speech and expression, except that no attacks on the Communist regime were allowed. There was little crime in the Soviet due to the efforts of an honest and efficient police system. The government, Mrs. Haft added, did not want residents to leave the country and made emigration as difficult as possible. A fee of \$283 payable in United States funds had been required for each passport for the members of her party.

Given what is known about the fate of religious communities under the Stalinist dictatorship, and the understanding of “freedom of speech and expression” in what was effectively a totalitarian police state, her claims seem naïve and out of touch with reality. They are also somewhat at odds with remarks attributed to her in a short article carried the same day in the *Regina Leader-Post* titled “**TRAVEL FROM RUSSIA, JOIN FAMILY HEAD**”. It related that “Shortage of bread and high cost of passports were the two chief complaints against the Soviet uttered by Mrs. Haft...but she admitted that her husband left Russia because of his attacks on the Communist government.” Rabbi Haft’s departure from the Soviet Union was certainly prescient, as he had already witnessed the pogroms and spontaneous religious persecutions that had taken place during the Revolution and as part of the militant anti-godless campaigns orchestrated by the Bolsheviks in the early 1920s. But the plight of believers of all faiths became significantly worse after April 1929, when a new Law on Religion essentially green-lighted the escalation of repression against all religious believers who continued to practise their faith, including observant Jews. It appears that Mrs. Haft was being very careful in commenting on Soviet policies, consciously or unconsciously seeking positive things to say about life under a Communist dictatorship. Regardless, in determinedly working to get his family out of the country, Rabbi Haft may have saved their lives and certainly spared them enormous hardships.

Rabbi Haft travelled to Wainwright, Alberta, to accompany his wife and children on the last leg of their six-week journey from the Soviet Union. It seems likely that he wanted to influence how their story got told in the press, for the reasons he explained earlier concerning his fears about possible repercussions that their comments might have for family and friends left behind in Poltava. When the train arrived at the CN station in Edmonton on the evening of 7 November, the Haftes were “Greeted joyously by more than 100 Jewish citizens,” as well as city journalists with questions they were keen to have answered. As recorded in the *Edmonton Journal* article “**Rabbi’s Family Here From Ukraine**” on 8 November, page 14:

Rabbi Haft spoke to his interviewers for a few minutes.

“I will give no interview tonight,” he announced.

“But our papers expect something,” protested the disappointed press representatives.

“How are conditions in the Ukraine?” he was asked.

“That is a big story. Maybe some other time we will tell it but not tonight,” was the answer.

A page 6 *Edmonton Bulletin* story on the same day, “**Wife And Family Of Jewish Rabbi Arrive From Ukraine,**” stated that the Hafts were taken for supper to the home of a local couple where they were joined by other Jewish friends from the city as well as Leduc, Bruderheim, and Lamont, talking late into the night. The *Bulletin* also ran a second and more detailed article about the Hafts on page 13 of their 8 November issue, “**RABBI’S KIN ARRIVE FROM RUSSIA / Bring First Hand Information Regarding Conditions There,**” scooping the rival *Edmonton Journal*. In it, Mrs. Haft was reported as saying:

“There is no unemployment in Russia...neither is there any prosperity or an affluence of even the barest necessities of life.

...

“Discrimination against nationality or race is unheard of. Military service becomes compulsory at the age of twenty-one.

SEVERE CONDITIONS

Conditions in Russia during the winter of 1932 and last summer were very severe. There was hardly any crop in 1932 and even coarse bread was a luxury often unheard of. The price of bread fluctuated between 6 and 7 roubles a pound. Every effort was being exerted to put the five year plan through in four years.

Last summer an outbreak of typhoid which lasted about three months, coupled with the already existing shortness of food, made living conditions almost intolerable. This year, however, the crops are quite good and the price of bread dropped to one rouble a pound.

Factories of every kind are being erected for the manufacture of automobiles, tractors and machinery of every kind. These are called the heavy industries, and the U.S.S.R. aims to be self supporting in those.

Considerable attention is also being paid to the lighter industries, such as clothing, shoes, etc.

Her observations, while partly accurate, reflect narratives aggressively promoted by Soviet authorities, who stressed the development of heavy industry under the First Five-Year plan and promised to produce more consumer goods under the next Five-Year plan in their efforts to deflect public attention away from the starvation in Ukraine. However, she could not have been aware of, nor fully understood, the nature and scale of the famine and the cold-blooded policies behind it.

This is evident in the page 16 *Edmonton Journal* story that ran on the following day under the headings: “**Claim Soviet Giving Food For Workers / Also Have Foodstuffs for Those Who are ‘Loyal’ / OTHERS HELPLESS...**”

In Soviet Russia there is food for those who work and for those loyal to the Communist party “but others don’t eat,” according to Miss Freda Haft, eldest daughter of Rabbi Haft, who with her mother, three sisters and young brother arrived in Edmonton Tuesday from Poltava [sic] in the Ukraine.

Asked if she had seen evidences of people suffering from hunger, she said that food was expensive for those who had to buy apart from what workers could get for their families. In general, some conditions were none too good but people had lived through many difficulties before, she discreetly added.

Does Not Know

Through an interpreter she was asked whether she had seen anything of political persecution of activities. "I do not know what was going on," she replied.

Teacher at a school she said that she was given work because she had been trained. But because she was not of the Communist party, the political teachings were delegated to others. She taught general subjects and knew nothing of the other details, she said.

...

Thrice before had the Haft family tried to leave the U.S.S.R. The general Soviet policy had been to allow only children and aged people to leave the country, others being valuable for work. The coming of age of the older members of the family had complicated getting permits to leave. On another occasion a health certificate was the reason given for withholding it.

While one is struck by the evasiveness of Freda's remarks, they are hardly surprising considering what her personal experiences must have been like in navigating the political complexities of Soviet society. The ultimate fate of family members and friends that the Hafts left behind is unknown, but one can assume that at the very least their lives would not have been easy. Even though the famine started to recede once the 1933 crop began to be harvested, arrests, purges, executions and deportations continued throughout the 1930s, only to be followed by the Second World War and the horrors of the Nazi occupation. Of course, anti-Semitism and discrimination on the basis of nationality or race never entirely disappeared despite the Kremlin's repeated proclamations to the contrary, and a campaign specifically targeting Jews was about to be unleashed when Stalin's unexpected death fortuitously curtailed its implementation. Whereas the Hafts were fortunate to escape the worst of the privations of the Holodomor of 1932-33, millions of their fellow Ukrainian citizens were not so lucky.

Although the starvation in Soviet Ukraine was said to have ended in the summer of 1933, recent demographic research has shown that people were still dying of hunger in 1934. Of course, untold others suffered lasting effects that seriously compromised their physical and mental health, ultimately shortening their lives. Nonetheless, appeals for the international community to intervene in aid of the victims of the famine created and used as a weapon by the Bolshevik leadership fell on deaf ears, in part because the Soviet government continued to insist that the victims themselves were largely responsible for their terrible fate and that there was no need for assistance from abroad.

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