

# Horrors of HOLODOMOR

It's the 75th anniversary of the Ukrainian Great Famine and painful memories linger for two survivors now living Canberra, **Lynne Minion** writes

**A**s a child of seven, Alexandra Krywoszyja survived one of history's greatest man-made catastrophes. Now 82 she remembers the Ukrainian Great Famine, or Holodomor, with clarity, the horrors of that time etched in her mind.

"People were dying," she says. "When somebody died, they never got a coffin . . . they just put the bodies on the wagon and took it to one big hole. When somebody died I didn't see anybody crying. No." It was simply too commonplace.

A 1932-33 program by Stalin to exterminate Ukrainians and dim their nationalism in the interests of the then Soviet Union's totalitarianism, the Holodomor resulted in the deaths of seven to 10 million people, including about a third of the nation's children.

Deliberate suppression of the campaign of systematic starvation led to it becoming a forgotten genocide, but now the Government of independent Ukraine is calling for international recognition of the pain of its past.

The timing is important.

It's the 75th anniversary of the Holodomor, and survivors such as Krywoszyja, who lives in Page, are still alive to tell of "the hungry year" when people went to unimaginable lengths to save their children, including a woman from the same village whose husband had died of hunger.

"She was left with six children and they're all crying for food," Krywoszyja says. "So she got one little one, nearly two years old, and Sophie went and killed him and cut him up, cooked him and gave it to [her other] children. They all eat. And she went on to the roof and she hanged herself, she could not stand it."

Halina, one of her three daughters, sits in an armchair in a retirement village townhouse, coaxing her mother to tell the stories usually spoken of in private.

"In one empty room just on a blanket or some kind of homemade [rug] lay this babka, this old grandma," Krywoszyja says of a visit long ago to a woman who lived over the road. "And my mama said, 'Oh, God how are you?' And she said, 'I am dying, they don't give me food, they've got two children.' And whenever they've got some food they give it to the children, not to old grandma, they let her die."

Two days later, the young girl saw the wagon pull up in front of the old woman's house "and then these men went inside and out they carried in this rag this old woman and put her up there with the other bodies".

The other remaining survivor in Canberra, Maria Janeczko, was 10 during the Holodomor and she remembers eating porcupine caught by her father to survive. "We had nothing to eat," she says.



"We ate our cat too. In the village all the dogs were gone, there were no barking dogs because people were hungry, they ate dogs and cats and everything. So we ate our cat and the next day we couldn't find anything [to eat]. So the insides we'd buried in the garden, we dug them up and washed them and cooked them."

But times worsened when her father, weak and swollen from starvation, left in search of food one day, telling her that she may not see him again. He never returned.

Janeczko, clearly still traumatised, repeats her father's last words to her as she sits in her

lounge-room in Lyons. Her husband Stanislav leans on his walking stick and listens to her with pride. Photos of the life they have made for themselves in Australia – showing their three children, seven grandchildren and six great-grandchildren – fill the walls, but the spectre of the Holodomor has followed her here.

She tells of being abandoned by a merciless stepmother on the streets with her 11-year-old brother after their father's death. They were orphans left to fend for themselves. "We had a very hard life," Janeczko says.

Begging for food by day and covered in sores and lice, at night

they hid from those who out of desperation had resorted to cannibalism.

"We were just wandering everywhere. Terrible things we see. Some people when you ask where we can stay in the night-time they tell us, 'Don't go there because they're killing children and eating them.' You never go there."

But occasionally within her childhood of unimaginable fear and hardship there were moments of kindness.

"People don't have anything to eat but they give you something. One woman living in the village . . . she took our old clothes and just buried them and she give us new

clothes, give us baths and everything."

The 75th anniversary of the Holodomor will be marked in the ACT on Sunday, December 16, with a commemoration at the Ukrainian Autocephalic Orthodox Church of St Nicholas, in Turner.

The Ukrainian ambassador, Valentyn Adomaytis, a speaker at the event, describes the genocide as "one of the most terrible crimes against humanity of the 20th century". International recognition of the genocide "is historically, politically and psychologically important for Ukrainians," he says. "This is the turning point which corrects falsified history,

