

# "This Was Nightmare, an Evil Dream Become Real!"

**Mendel Osherowitch** (1888-1965) was born in the Ukrainian town of Trostianets', Sumy province. He emigrated to the USA in 1910. He was a Yiddish translator, a playwright, the author of a number of novels and helped to organize the Federation of Ukrainian Jews. In February and March 1932, Mendel Osherowitch visited the Soviet Union. Although Osherowitch did not know it, he had arrived in Soviet Ukraine just as the Great Famine of 1932-1933 was metastasizing into the Holodomor. In the end we are left with a remarkable and moving chronicle of what Osherowitch saw on a journey across Soviet Ukraine in early winter of 1932 -- on the very eve of a politically engineered famine that would soon consume millions of lives.

**Lubomyr Luciuk, Professor  
Royal Military College of Canada**

[...]

"It was already late when I returned to the hotel [in Moscow]. There I received an answer to the telegram I had sent to my mother in the small Ukrainian town of Trostianets'. So I began thinking about setting out on the road and I spoke about my plans with other people. One of them counselled me: 'If you are travelling to your mother in Ukraine you should take bread from here because there isn't any there. People there are dying from hunger.' I couldn't understand this. What could this mean? Had Ukraine not always been the breadbasket for all of Russia? What did this mean, having to take bread with you to Ukraine?

All night I couldn't sleep because of this – there isn't any bread in Ukraine!  
[...]

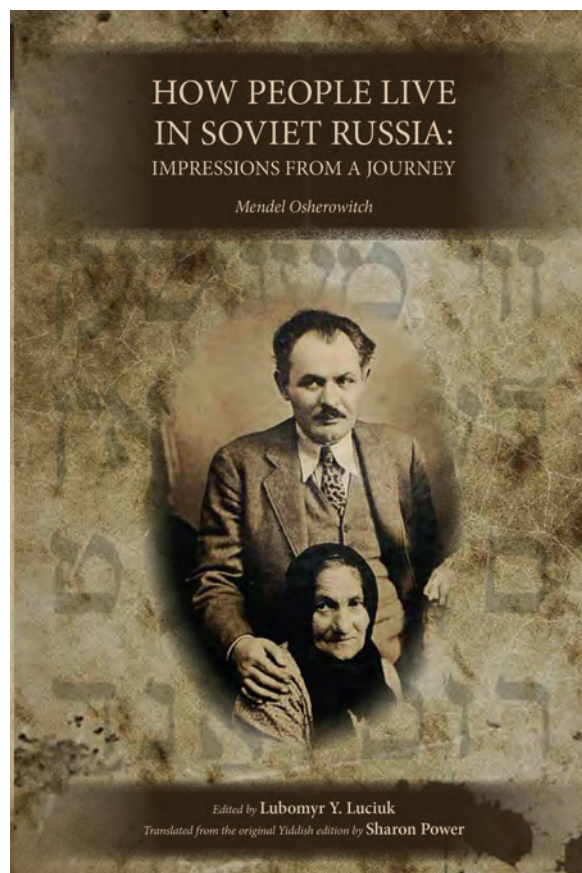
On the second day I got home there was a fair.  
[...]

Everyone wanted news about life in America. Everyone had stories to tell about life in town. Friends asked me: 'Do you still remember Volodya, the tall fellow whose father was a writer for the starosta of the town?'

'Well, sure I remember him. I would actually like to see him.'

'You can't, not anymore,' they answered: 'They found him dead this morning, in the street. He died of hunger.' They talked about this as if dealing with a completely ordinary thing, as if starving to death wasn't news at all.  
[...]

When I arrived in Ukraine I heard in several places about revolts in the villages, although they had occurred some time ago. Most often I was told about so-called *babi volyn'ki*, women's rebellions. From what I was told, if only in a few words, and only here and there, it became clear that even if the world didn't know about them, and the foreign correspondents in Moscow haven't reported anything, insurrections had taken place in many Ukrainian villages. When they did the peasants placed their



Mendel Osherowitch and his mother, 1932.

wives, holding small children in their arms, into the front ranks, hoping they wouldn't be shot. All of these rebellions were suppressed, however, and with an iron hand – so now the countryside is calm and nobody is permitted to speak about what happened.

Very often one also hears about fires in the villages.  
[...]

Sometimes a fire starts burning rather abruptly at the collective farm. [...] For the peasants hate the *kolkhoz*, even more than they once hated the nobleman's estate. When they see the collective farm burning, they make no effort to put out those flames.  
[...]

After I left my hometown and the poor villages where I had seen so much trouble and want, I set out for the city of Rostov, located by the Don River.

For around 10 hours I went in a 'hard' train car, where peasants or even poorer people with heavy packages and bundles usually travel. What I heard and saw I

will never forget, not for the rest of my life. In this car there wasn't a single, tiny spot left open, not even a space small enough to pass a needle through. The stuffiness was so great you thought you would choke. People were sitting in various curled-up poses – not only on benches but also on the luggage shelves and floor. Everyone, the majority being peasant men and women were dressed in grey and torn fur [sheepskin] coats, in ragged clothing, in old sacks from which pieces and patches were hanging down, dirty and stained – [...].

[...]

I overheard the peasants speaking in Ukrainian.  
[...]

'The peasant no longer even has any bread' a third exclaimed.

'And we are eating beets...'

'And we are eating potato peelings... just like our animals once did'.

'We are getting swollen from hunger...'

'We are dying of hunger...'

'If you have anything in your house they come and take it...'

'There's already nothing left to take...'

That was how they spoke, in broken-off words, almost as if from between clenched teeth. A little later someone said: 'They say that in the larger cities bread is cheaper.'

[...]

As for Moscow: 'in Moscow – they say – you can even get white bread.' Someone answered him: 'So what if you can get it in Moscow? Around here, in our villages, it's bad'.

[...]

Everything I had seen and heard upset me, so much that whenever I was in one city, I was already thinking about leaving for another, hoping I might find something somewhere else to gladden my heart – not, of course, in terms of machines and factories but in the lives of people.

That was my hope when I set out for Kharkiv. Kharkiv was then the capital of Ukraine.

[...]

It was as late as one 1:00 o'clock at night when I arrived in Kharkiv.

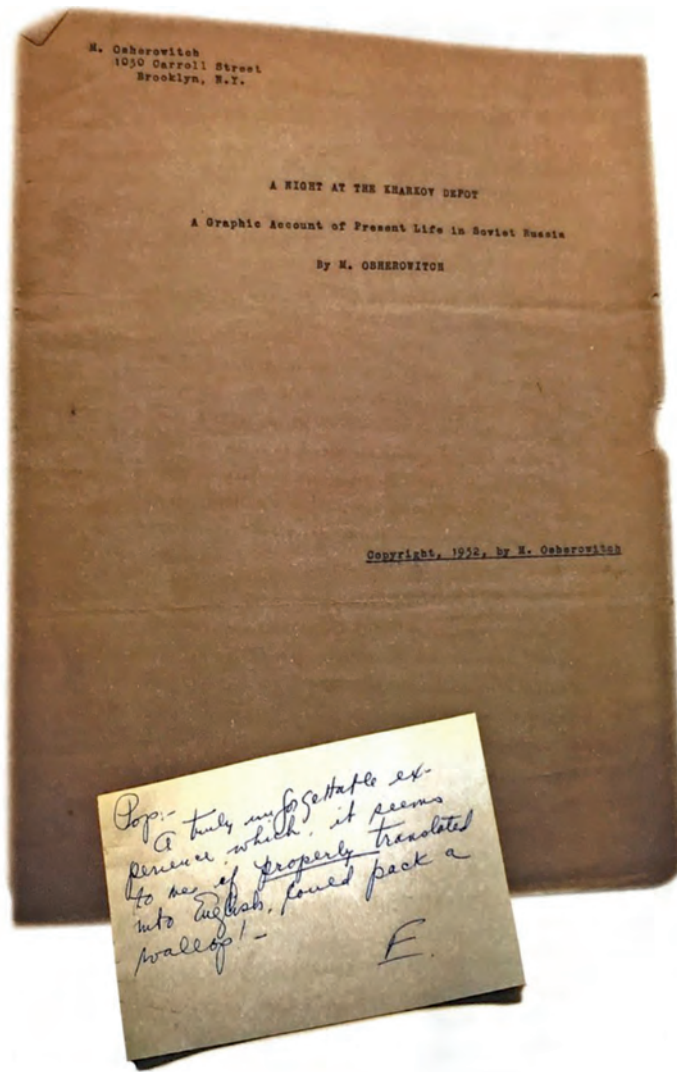
[...]

The entire railway terminal, inside and out, was overcrowded with people, most dressed poorly, covered in such rags and tatters. It was all actually hard to look at.

[...]

You felt as if you were standing in a kind of a gloomy cemetery, watching people clustered before the graves, petrified, still alive yet only dimly aware of where they might be, unsure even if they were still of this world, wondering what had happened to them.

Two men in rags stood near a round iron stove. It had long been as cold as a corpse's head. Their half-bare feet were wrapped in straw. Scraps hung down from the rags they wore as clothing and here and there the naked flesh of these poor and starving people peeked out.



A page from Osherowitch's memoir.

life that had become unendurable, about suffering worse than what one might expect to find in hell.

On the streets I was always bumping into yet another beggar, standing with an outstretched hand: 'Give me something! I want to eat!' 'Give me a piece of bread! I am hungry'

Another man told this story: 'Not long ago a friend of mine in the KOMSOMOL was sent together with others into the villages. She was to speak with the peasants, to convince them to give away whatever they might still have and to then go to work sowing the fields. She saw terrible scenes of want and poverty and hunger in the villages and told me all about it. In nearly every house, she said, people were lying about, swollen from hunger. In one house where she began to speak about how they should be delivering more grain to the State, about how they needed to start plowing and sowing, a poor peasant woman, starving, angry, got down from her bed. Pinching

the girl's cheek and hard, she said: 'Harno ty, divchyna, hovorysh, luchshe by tak zhe harno robyla' (Easy for you to say, girl, but it would be better if you worked as well as you talk). The man ended up by saying: 'This girl returned home with the swollen cheek. She cannot bring herself to harangue people swollen with hunger, agitating and trying to convince them to give up more for the State. She no longer wants to go into the villages.

[...]

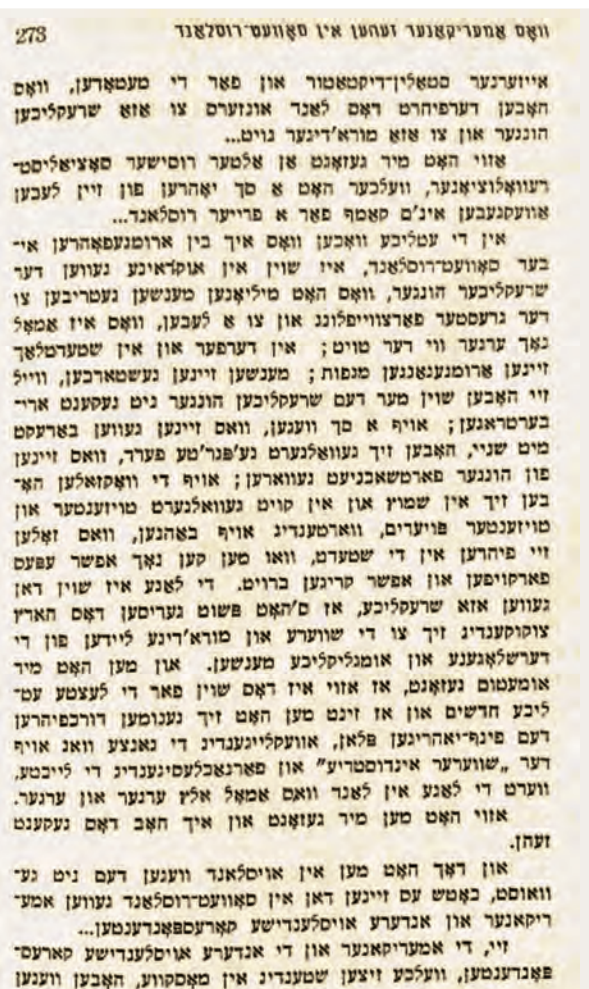
Sitting as I was in an empty train car I thought about the thousands, indeed hundreds of thousands, of destitute, starving and misfortunate people I had seen spending days and nights in the filth and dirt of overcrowded train stations.

[...]

I knew it was not going to be easy to create a new order in a country not industrially developed. Yet nothing I could have imagined was even one hundredth as bad as what I saw there, in real life! This was no life. This was nightmare, an evil dream become real!"

[...]

**Excerpts from *How People Live in Soviet Russia: Impressions from a Journey by Mendel Osherowitch* (New York, 1933), translated from Yiddish by Sharon Power, edited by Lubomyr Y. Luciuk, Toronto-Kingston (Chair of Ukrainian Studies at the University of Toronto, and the Kashtan Press, 2020)**



A page from the 1933 Yiddish edition, "Ukraine was already experiencing an appalling famine."

[...]

During the few weeks I travelled around Soviet Russia, Ukraine was already experiencing an appalling famine. Millions of people had been driven to the greatest desperation, to a life sometimes even worse than death. Plagues circulated in villages and in the towns. People died because they could no longer endure their terrible hunger. On many roads, covered with snow, lay dead horses, withered away from hunger. At the train stations, thousands and thousands of peasants wandered around, covered in bodily filth and dirt, waiting for trains they hoped would take

them into the cities, where they could perhaps sell something, maybe get bread. The dreadful misery of these people, this harrowing state of affairs, tore at one's heart. Everywhere I was told conditions had already been like this for a few months and that since the Five Year Plan began, emphasizing heavy over light industry, the situation in the country had gotten worse and worse.

That's what I was told. It was true.

What was happening wasn't generally known abroad, despite the presence of American and foreign correspondents in Moscow at this time. These journalists just "didn't know" about the terrible famine in the country.

[...]

Why should they? They travelled only in First Class train cars, where they experienced a real rushn etmosfir [A real Russian atmosphere.], one in which they could drink tea from a samovar. In the cities they visited they also saw nothing. Their hotels were always well prepared, stocked with anything they might wish for.

In Tulchyn, [Vinnytsia province] as in many other provincial cities of Ukraine now, it's no novelty to hear someone saying: 'Today 4 people died of hunger' or 'yesterday 3 people starved to death.' By now this kind of news barely bothers anyone. They're used to it.

In the few days I was in Tulchyn not a single day passed when I didn't hear such tidings. Wherever I walked, wherever I went, people talked about hunger and want, about sickness and death. They told awful things about a

## ***Direct Holodomor Losses For Citizens of the Ukrainian SSR by Their Ethnic Origin***

**The Stalinist regime also targeted for destruction, along with the key segments of the rural population, the cultural, religious, economic and political elites of the Ukrainian SSR to prevent it from gaining independence from the Moscow-centered Soviet empire. The target was Ukraine as a political nation and a developing civil society.**

### **STATISTICS FOR 1933 ONLY**

	RURAL		URBAN		TOTAL	
	Losses	per 1,000	Losses	per 1,000	Losses	per 1,000
<b>Total</b>	3,335,271	149	193,926	27	3,529,197	119
<b>Ukrainians</b>	3,102,019	160	130,551	34	3,232,570	139
<b>Russians</b>	102,759	77	33,474	18	136,233	42
<b>Jews</b>	13,228	42	23,792	19	37,020	24
<b>Poles</b>	33,518	91	3,117	34	36,635	80
<b>Germans</b>	23,091	63	1,358	36	24,448	61
<b>Rest</b>	60,657	110	1,634	9	62,290	84

Oleh Wolowyna, "What was the Target of the Holodomor (1932-1933 Famine in Ukraine), Ukrainians or Soviet Ukraine? Holodomor Losses by Nationality", *Paper presented at the 23rd Annual World Convention of the Association for the Study of Nationalities, Columbia University, New York (3-5 May 2018)*

## **Historical legacy of Ukrainian uprisings**

"For the sake of completeness, we shall also examine a hypothesis that suggests links between high regional direct losses and past events in those regions. It posits that the degree of resistance and resulting persecutions in certain regions, described in the section 'Resistance and repressions in 1932,' is related to different types of peasant revolts having occurred in those places during the preceding period (1918–31). Thus, regions with strong resistance to collectivization and grain procurement in 1932 had a history of rebellions in the past, of which the Soviet regime was keenly aware – especially in relation to the great social and national uprising of the spring and summer of 1919, which had forced them out of Ukraine, and in particular out of its two capitals (Kyiv and Kharkiv). This historical memory resulted, first, in stronger repressions and thus higher excess deaths in 1932, and then in a decision, taken in late 1932 and applied during the following months, to use hunger as a tool to eradicate the possibility of a new general uprising, and to deprive the Ukrainian national movement of its social base, which Stalin had identified as being the villages."

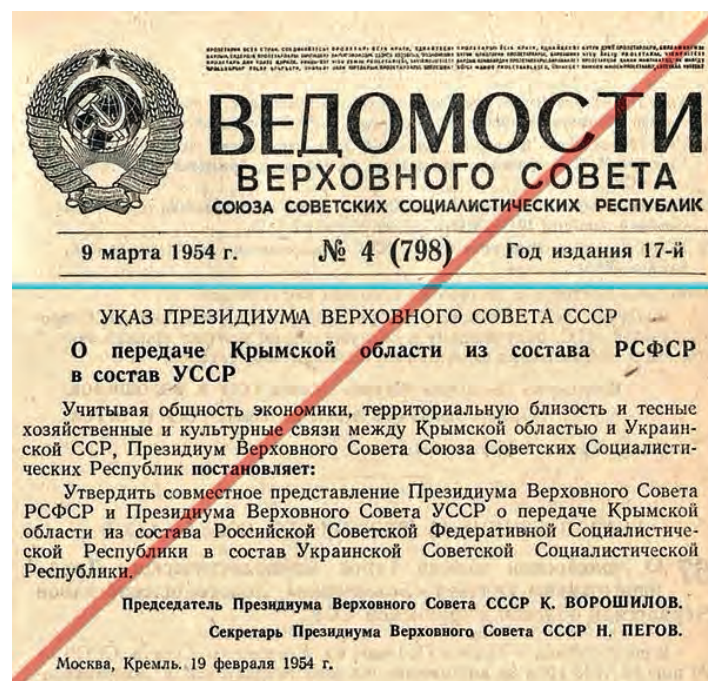
Oleh Wolowyna, et. al., "Regional Variations of 1932-34 Famine Losses in Ukraine," *Canadian Studies in Population, Vol. 43, № 3-4 (2016)*



# The Holodomor in Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula

The Crimean Peninsula on the northern shore of the Black Sea was administratively integrated on 19 February 1954 to Ukraine's mainland territory thus restoring the geographical unity of the country.

In 2014 through military aggression the Crimea was again occupied and annexed to the Russian Federation. In the course of the 20th century the Crimean Tatars, as an indigenous people of Ukraine, were also specifically targeted by Moscow for repression and elimination as a threat to Russian empire-building – during the famine of 1921-22, the Holodomor of 1932-33, and the mass deportation in 1944 of the entire people from the Crimea to Soviet Central Asia. The repression of the Crimean Tatars was conducted by Moscow as a matter of policy following exactly the same pattern as it was applied to the Ukrainian people on Ukraine's mainland and in the Kuban region of Northern Caucasus. After suffering genocidal losses due to the forced deportation, the Crimean Tatars returned to their historical homeland in the Crimea when Ukraine regained its independence in 1991.



**ABOVE: THE 9 MARCH 1954 ISSUE OF THE OFFICIAL NEWSPAPER NEWS OF THE SUPREME SOVIET OF THE USSR ANNOUNCING THE TRANSFER ON 19 FEBRUARY 1954 OF THE CRIMEA FROM THE RUSSIAN SFSR TO THE UKRAINIAN SSR. THE TRANSFER WAS EFFECTED "TAKING INTO ACCOUNT A COMMON ECONOMY, TERRITORIAL CONTIGUOUSNESS AND TIGHT ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL LINKS".**

## The Crimean Tatars

"Among the numerically larger national minorities [179,000 in 1926] living on Ukrainian territory during the interwar years, the Crimean Tatars held a unique position. Most of them lived in the Crimean peninsula, which at the time was not even part of Soviet Ukraine. [...]

The Tatarization of the Soviet Crimea changed with the coming of the Stalinist revolution in 1928. The regimentation of Stalinism thus started even earlier in the Crimean A.S.S.R. than in neighboring Soviet Ukraine. The results, however, were the same. In 1928-1929, dekulakization brought the removal from the Crimea of between 35,000 and 40,000 peasants. The forced

collectivization and grain requisitioning which followed led to scattered armed resistance and refusal to sow crops. The drastic reduction in agricultural production combined with governmental confiscation of grain resulted in a prolonged famine between 1931 and 1933 and the loss by starvation of an estimated 100,000 lives - about 60 percent were Crimean Tatars, the rest Russians, Ukrainians, and other inhabitants of the peninsula. As in Soviet Ukraine, the authorities refused to acknowledge the famine or provide the starving with any relief. [...]

Upward of 3,500 Crimean Tatar government and party officials and intellectuals were either exiled or executed. [...]

Between 1931 and 1935 the religious facet of Crimean Tatar identity was virtually eliminated with the closure of hundreds of mosques and the exile to Siberia of most of the peninsula's Islamic clergy (*mullahs*).

In an effort to distance the Crimean Tatars even further from their traditional heritage and to bring them more in line with 'modern socialist' currents, the face of their language was changed; from 1929 the Arabic alphabet was replaced in all Crimean Tatar publications and public signage with the Roman/Latin alphabet, then from 1938 with the Cyrillic. The new linguistic trends even saw Russian words and grammatical rules introduced into the Crimean Tatar language."



“The Stalinist ‘revolution from above’ initiated in 1928 also had a profound – and, as it turned out, a negative – impact on Crimean Tatar cultural and social life, in particular the program of Tatarization.

[...]

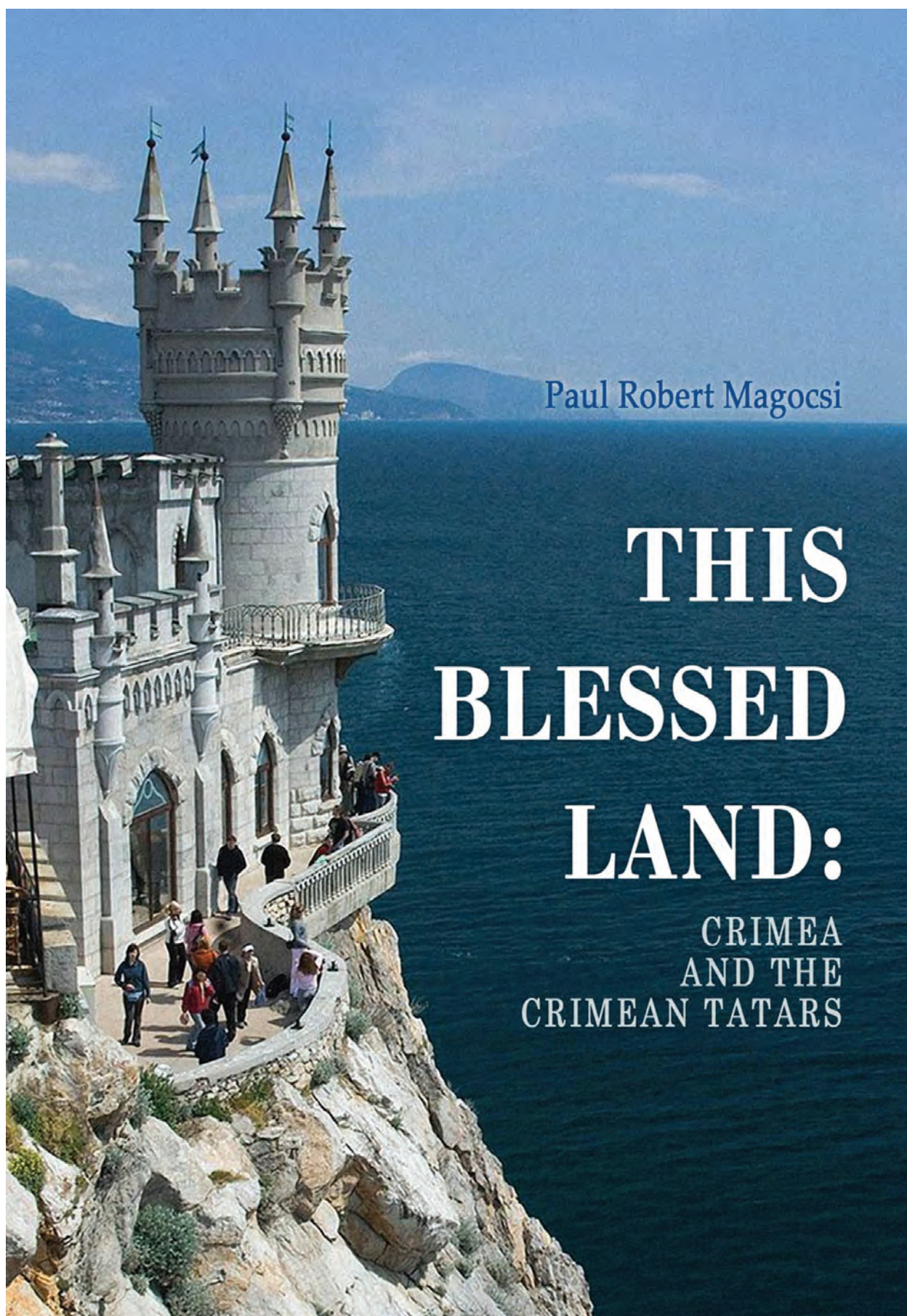
The regimentation connected with the Stalinist revolution that eventually affected all walks of life started, in effect, earlier in the Crimean ASSR than in other parts of the Soviet Union. The results, however, were the same.

[...]

One could, therefore, easily conclude that during the 1930s the Tatars were being subjected to a state imposed policy of cultural genocide, with the result that Crimea was rapidly transformed into a Slavic, or more specifically a Sovietized Russian land.”

**Paul Robert Magocsi, *A History of Ukraine: The Land and Its Peoples*, 2nd. Ed., Toronto (2010).**

**Paul Robert Magocsi, *This Blessed Land: Crimea and the Crimean Tatars*, Toronto (2014)**



Tobacco plantation in the Crimea (1930s).

# “Other People’s Pain is Everyone’s Pain”



Ihor Shchupak



Mykola Rudenko, leader of the Ukrainian Helsinki Group, sentenced in July 1977 to 7 years' labor camp, 5 years' exile. 1976 photo.

“The Holodomor and the Holocaust are the most horrific tragedies in the history of Ukraine, two genocides on an immense scale. The main victims of the Holodomor were millions of Ukrainians; Stalinist terror was directed precisely at the Ukrainian peasantry. The members of other nationalities living in Ukraine – Russians, Jews, Bulgarians, Tatars, and others – perished alongside Ukrainians. During this grim period, when the famine was sucking all human feelings out of people’s souls, when people were driven to despair and horrific displays of cannibalism, despite all this there were bursts of humanity and mutual neighborly support, including between Ukrainians and Jews.

The victims of the Holocaust during the Second World War were Jews; of the six million European Jews who were exterminated by the Nazis, 1.5 million were destroyed in the Ukrainian lands. Besides Jews, the Nazis and their henchmen killed Roma, Soviet prisoners of war, and Ukrainian patriots. Ukrainian heroes, who sought to protect their Jewish neighbors from the flames of the Holocaust, also perished.

[...]

The assistance that Jews offered their Ukrainian neighbors during the Holodomor and the mass repressions acted as a stimulus to reciprocal noble acts. For example, during the Holocaust the Ukrainian inhabitants of the small village of Dzhuryn, in Vinnytsia oblast, helped Jews who had stood up for the local priest during collectivization.

I recorded the reminiscences of Dora Abramivna Teplytska, who recounted examples of compassion that Jewish and Ukrainian neighbors showed each other during the Holodomor and the Holocaust.

[...]

Ordinary human experience attests that it is easier to survive in difficult circumstances if there is mutual aid. An important lesson of the Holodomor and Holocaust, an important lesson of history, teaches that other people’s pain is everyone’s pain. This applies to both nations and individuals.”

**Ihor Shchupak, Director of the *Tkuma* Ukrainian Institute for Holocaust Studies and the Jewish Memory and Holocaust in Ukraine Museum, Dnipro (2013)**

“From the first years of the Stalinist dictatorship, Ukraine became the scene of genocide and ethnocide. To show that we are not exaggerating, let us recall the academic definition of genocide. Here it is:

GENOCIDE – one of the gravest crimes against humanity, consisting of the destruction of national, ethnic, racial or religious population groups ... especially the deliberate creation of such living conditions that are calculated to lead to the total or partial physical destruction of any population group.

That is what is said about genocide in the Ukrainian Soviet Encyclopedia. The authors of the article, however, do not cite examples of genocide – examples for which they would not have to search very far.

In 1933, the Ukrainian nation, which for many centuries had not known famine, lost over six million people, dead from starvation. This famine, which affected the entire nation, was artificially created by the authorities: Wheat was confiscated to the last grain.”

**Mykola Rudenko, from “Memorandum №1”, Kyiv (1976), in *The Human Rights Movement in Ukraine: Documents of the Ukrainian Helsinki Group, 1976-1980*, Baltimore (1980)**



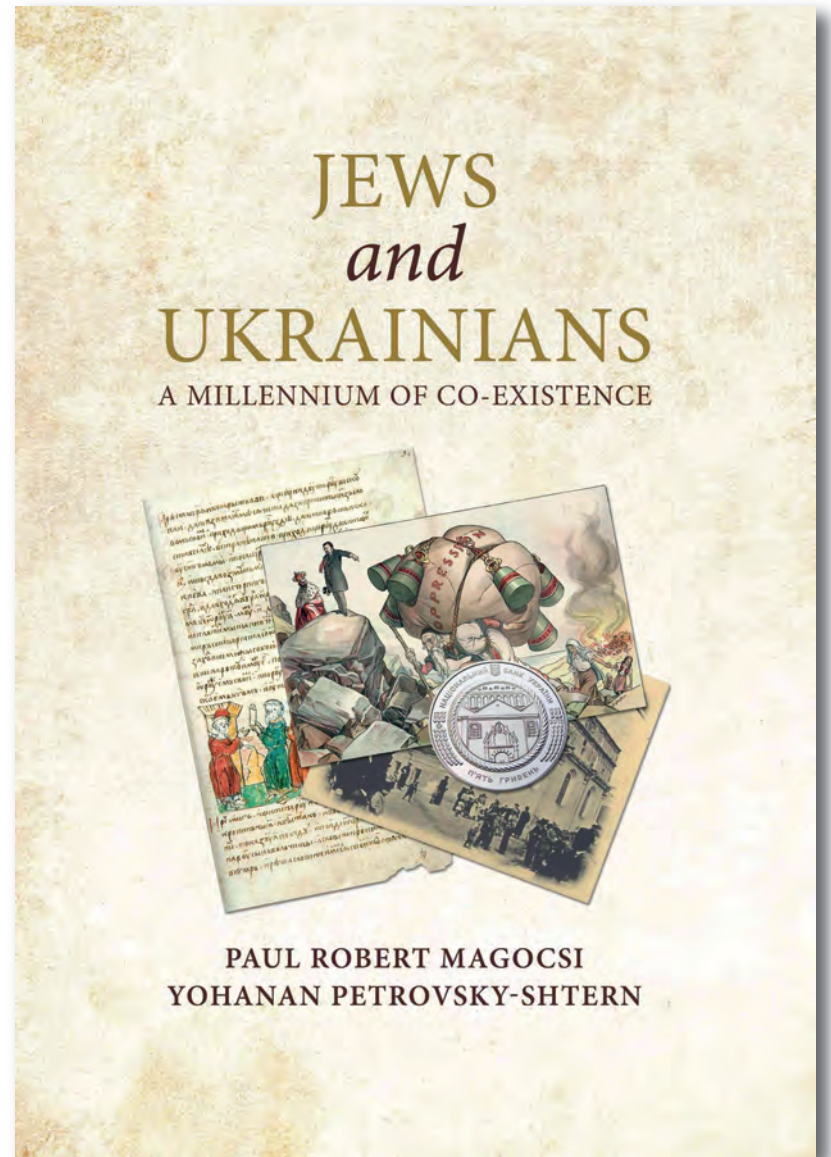
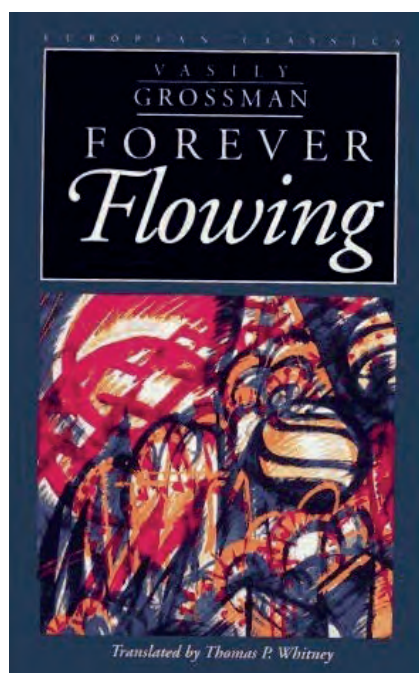
# Ukrainian Dissidents and Jewish Intellectuals



Vasilii Grossman

[...]

“The so-called Thaw of the late 1950s and early 1960s, a period when the Soviet leadership reduced to a degree the strict government controls and censorship that characterized Stalinist rule, also witnessed an unprecedented rapprochement between the country's leading Ukrainian and Jewish intellectuals. They were united in their rejection of state-orchestrated policies of enforced assimilation, de-Ukrainianization, and anti-Semitism. For example, **Vasilii Grossman** finished an epic novel, *Life and Fate*, and a historical short novel, *Forever Flowing*, works in which he not only equated Stalinism and Nazism but also traced parallels



between Ukraine's Great Famine (Holodomor) and the Holocaust and the victimization of Ukrainians and Jews.  
[...]

Ultimately, the Russian-language Vasilii Grossman was the first among Soviet writers to equate the Holodomor and the Holocaust and to portray Ukraine's tragedy as a state-orchestrated famine, doing so long before anyone in the Soviet Union even dared think about any similarity between those tragedies in the lives of the two peoples. The loyalty of Jewish writers to Ukrainian themes went far beyond the requirements of *couleur locale* or of images from a nostalgic childhood and represented instead a high level of solidarity and empathy toward things Ukrainian.”

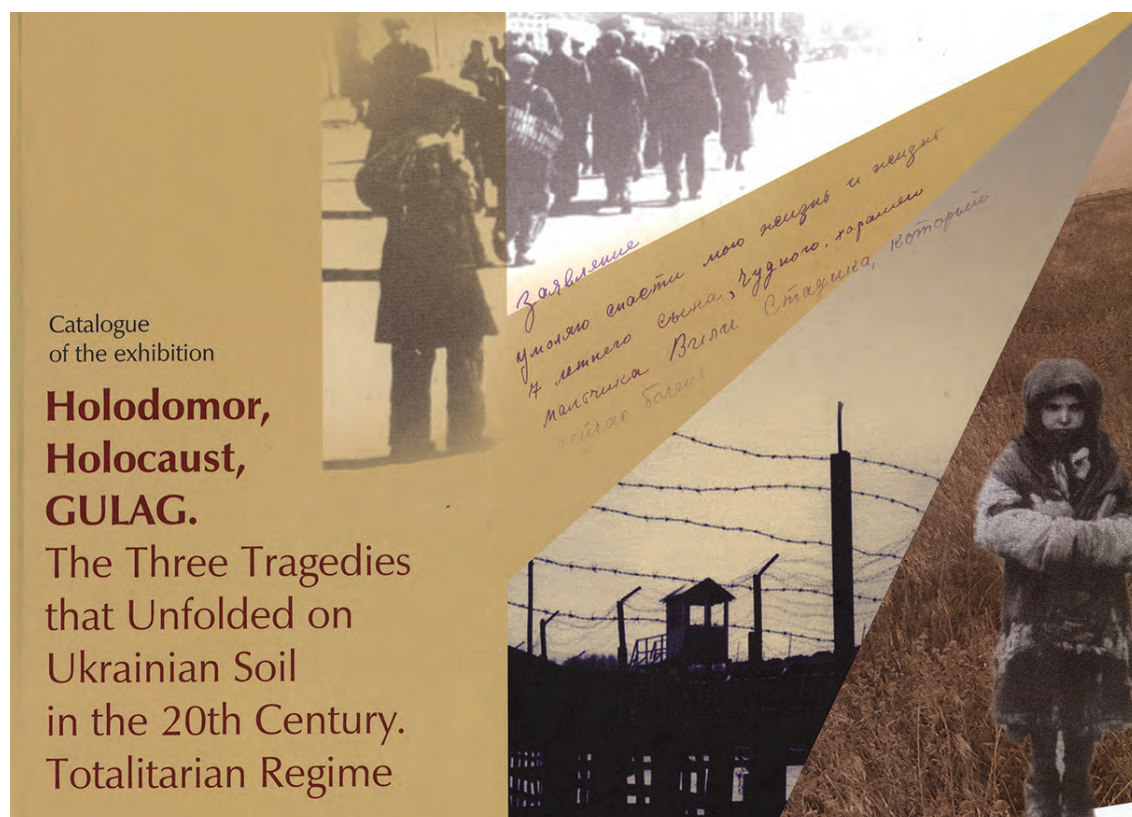
**Paul Robert Magocsi and Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern,  
*Jews and Ukrainians:  
A Millennium of Co-existence,  
Toronto (2016)***

# Holodomor, Holocaust, Gulag:

*The Three Tragedies that Unfolded on Ukrainian Soil in the 20th Century*



Julia Smilianska



“This **exhibition** is a dialogue... between those who lived in the 20th century, who were born to live, love, and be happy, but whose lives were ruthlessly wasted by the disasters of the 20th century...

[...]

This segment of the exhibition shows how the **GULAG** Archipelago expanded and strengthened, covering the territory of the huge empire, and how lives of individual people were ruined drawn under the wheels of history. Those people were priests and poets, engineers and movie directors – the elite of the nation ruthlessly trampled down by the totalitarian system.

After that, the authorities got down to exterminating ordinary people. Now their victims were not individual leaders, whether religious or political, but each and every adult, child, and old man ... [who] were killed through the man-made famine orchestrated in 1932-1933, which broke the major idea, the pillar on which the Ukrainian peasantry had rested for centuries, that went as follows: ‘As long as I have a piece of land, I will not starve’ ... Alas, the policy pursued by the ‘state of

workers’ and peasants buried that idea along with millions of victims. This section of the exhibition dedicated to **Holodomor** includes memories of eyewitnesses, documents, diagrams, charts, photographs, letters, and faces looking at us from the abyss with sorrow.

Holocaust, the tragedy common for the entire Europe, had its specifics on Ukrainian soil. It was here that the Nazis learned how to murder hundreds of thousands of people and the Final Solution of the Jewish Issue was launched.

[...]

This means that we must learn to maintain peace, build a tolerant society, nurture the understanding of the value of human life, and learn the lessons of history by listening to the voices of the ever-living dead who warn us of the danger.”

**Director of the Institute of Judaica**  
**Julia Smilianska,**  
**Foreword, *Catalogue of the***  
***Exhibition Holodomor,***  
***Holocaust, GULAG,***  
**Kharkiv (2014)**