

The Bourgeois Woman



Mykola Ponedilok

Translated by Maria Kiciuk, Ph.D.

Foreword

The Bourgeois Woman is a reflection of the tragic events which took place in Ukraine in 1932-1933. It is a story of unspeakable brutality, total disregard for human dignity, and life itself. It is a story of the Holodomor, the man-made famine which destroyed millions of innocent lives.

Holodomor



In 1932-33, a decade after Ukraine was forcibly incorporated into the Soviet Union, the brutal Communist regime of Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin embarked on a campaign to exterminate the Ukrainian people. It confiscated all grain produced by Ukrainian farmers and punished or executed those trying to obtain food. At the height of the famine, as many as 25,000 people were dying per day, 1,000 per hour, or 17 per minute, while the Soviet government exported grain out of the starving country.

Children's mortality rate was very high. It is estimated that three million children died during the Holodomor, which constitutes about one-third of the Holodomor victims. In September of 1933, approximately two-thirds of the school children were reported as missing from school.

Some parents resorted to abandoning their children in urban areas, which were not affected as much by the famine as rural areas. In late spring of 1933, over 300,000 homeless children were recorded in the Kyiv region alone. Since orphanages and children's shelters were overcrowded, most of these children died on the streets, due to starvation and disease.

When word leaked out about the forced famine and an attempt was made by international authorities to bring aid to Ukraine, the Soviet government turned them away, denying that any famine existed. Only a handful of reporters, such as Walter Duranty, who perpetuated the Soviet lies, were allowed into the country.

In his essay "Soviet Genocide in the Ukraine," Rafael Lemkin, who coined the word "genocide," describes the genocidal destruction of the Ukrainian nation, including Ukraine's cultural and political elite, the Ukrainian Orthodox Autocephalous Church, the starvation of the Ukrainian

farming population and its replacement with non-Ukrainian population. He calls it “the classic example of Soviet genocide, its longest and broadest experiment in Russification – the destruction of the Ukrainian nation.”

For many years, Ukrainians living under the grip of the Soviet regime were not even allowed to mention the famine. After the breakup of the Soviet Union and the declaration of an independent Ukraine in 1991, sealed archives were uncovered, revealing the brutality of the genocide archives.

About the Author

Mykola Ponedilok is a well-known author whose works became very popular in the Ukrainian diaspora. In Ukraine, however, his name and his works are becoming known only now.

According to his short autobiography, published after his death, Mykola Ponedilok was born in a rural area of eastern Ukraine in 1922. As an eleven year-old boy, he witnessed the atrocities committed in the name of Russian imperialism. He and his family somehow survived the Holodomor, but half of the villagers perished and were buried in mass graves. His father was dispossessed of all his possessions and sent to Siberia, where he perished. His mother suffered from tuberculosis and died at a young age.

One of his most vivid memories of this dreadful period in Ukraine’s history was an incident which happened when he was in the ninth grade. A popular Ukrainian teacher was arrested, in front of her students, because she was planning to take the class to visit the birthplace of Ukraine’s foremost poet, Taras Shevchenko.

During World War II, destiny brought Mykola Ponedilok to Germany, where he lived as a laborer and later as a displaced person. He made his literary debut in 1947 with the publication of his novella *Chorna khustyna* (Black Kerchief), on the topic of the Holodomor. *Burzhuyka* (The Bourgeois Woman) first appeared in the collection *Hovoryt lyshe pole* (Only the Field Speaks) in 1962 (Homin Ukrainy, Toronto).

In 1949, he immigrated to the United States and lived in New York City until his untimely death at the age of fifty-four. He is buried at the Ukrainian cemetery in Bound Brook, New Jersey.

The Bourgeois Woman

The woman was trudging to and fro by the gate – emaciated, hunched over, with a worn-out bundle behind her back...

Barefoot...And one could see what a difficult and distant journey her feet endured...How thickly they were covered with road dust...And how her toes, wrapped in rags, were battered with stones and clods...

She was wearing an old cloak, carefully mended here and there. A gray homespun burlap skirt. In her hands – a small cotton toy: half bunny rabbit, half kitten with one patched ear, a short tail, and decorated with all the colors found in the household.

The woman made the sign of the cross and looked around. No one. Putting the letters together with difficulty, she read the sign above the gate: Uman Children's Shelter.

Should she linger at the gate? Perhaps, they will let her into the yard without any obstacles, where the children are bustling around, and their colorful, high-pitched voices ring out like a heartfelt native song...

The gate opened with a screech. Hurriedly, the woman wiped her face and eyes with her rough palm, straightened out her cloak and fearfully, as if, God forbid, she was committing a forbidden act, stepped into the yard.

In the midst of the yard there is a pile of sand. Children are playing in the sand. Some are pouring the sand; some are building something with the sand, and still others, with loud shouts, are jumping around, tumbling, and wrestling...

As if mesmerized, the woman stares at the sand. She gazes lovingly at each face, searching among the sweet and innocent faces the one dearest to her heart.

Not there?!

Maybe she looked in such a hurry that she didn't notice?

Once again she stares at the children. Yanking the bundle from her shoulders, she runs up and falls to her knees, searching each face with all her being...

"You don't have a mother, either?" – a little one blurts out from the sand pile, looking up at the woman with her wide, light blue eyes, as blue as the lakes in the steppes.

"You don't have one? But we, oh, yes, we have a mother!"

"You do?" And the woman's heart is about to leap out of her breast from joy and grief. Her temples are throbbing, and her face glows feverishly.

"You have a mother? Oh, what a nice, what a beautiful girl! The pretty one has a mother."

"I do," repeats the little one, "I do!" and she points into the distance, where a dog is roaming. "Mother is right there. She bites."

"Mother doesn't bite, my pretty one. Mother..."

“She bites. She bites! And she barks...”

The child jumps from the sand and runs after the dog. She wants to catch it by the tail, but the shaggy dog shows its teeth and runs away. The little girl trips and falls, choking with tears. The woman rushes to the child and lifts her up, comforting her and covering her with kisses...

“Mother runs away!” the little one complains bitterly and sobs, either from pain, or because she didn’t get to pet the dog. “She...runs...away!”

“Mother never runs away, my child.”

“She runs away. She runs away. And she barks.”

The woman’s whole world becomes obscured by tears. The child’s words lash at her. They penetrate her soul and there, somewhere in the depth, in the raw, open wound, pierce her heart with a thin sharp blade.

How does one explain a mother’s boundless love to a child who has never known such love? How does one breathe a mother’s profound warmth into a child who has never experienced any warmth, except for a dog’s kisses.

Is this what her Olenka thinks about a mother? “She runs away...She runs away...And she barks...”

She never ran away from her, her dearest Olenka. She left her right there in front of the gate. And having lost her, she lost her whole being. She lost her tranquility, her smile, and her health. She lost the light of day and the darkness of night, which merged into a horrible existence, as bitter as an open sore that drags on, not for hours or weeks, but for eternity, like gray dust on the road.

But how fortunate that she found her child in time and came to her rescue. From now on there will be an end to Olenka’s suffering. She will take her daughter back home, to her family. And together with her daughter, perhaps she, who has aged so prematurely and whose soul has been shattered, will regain some peace of mind, a gleam of bright day and dark night with its health-promoting dreams...Perhaps a happy smile and soul-relieving tears will at last return to her...

Oh, when Olenka is finally home, she won’t leave her for a minute. She will put Olenka on a sofa - neat, elegant, and dressed like a doll - and gaze at her lovingly without end. How tenderly she will care for her... How she will caress her!..

She will bruise her feet to get food for her... To give her, who has suffered so much, the best food... Yes, yes, Olenka will have enough of everything to eat. And she will be smothered with caresses and kisses...

“Are you searching?” Next to her there appeared a stooped figure of a man with plucked out reddish mustache and a hoarse voice. “Are you searching?”

“Oh, yes, my child, dear man. Are you from here?”

“I’m from everywhere,” the man waved his hand around. “Simply everywhere. Where they give me food, there I run with my calluses. Here I wheedle a piece of bread, there a

soup bone, and somewhere else some miserly pennies – this is how I survive. Here at the shelter I have been puttering around in the yard for the past two days. It was as neglected and filthy as our Soviet government... Let thunder strike me if I'm lying. But this is in secret..."

"You..."

"What about me? I should keep quiet because you might report me? I spit on it! I was just cleaning the floor in the dispensary and found some alcohol. And now, I need the Soviet regime as much as that dog needs burdocks and fleas," he said pointing with his head to the corner where the dog was lying. "That's exactly how much. And you, I see, don't have a great liking for it. Yes? Did I guess it right? Or perhaps you, like a fool, are a member of the Party?"

"I'm from the village."

"Oh, from the village. In the village there is less of this nasty weed. But here in the city, these Communists... devil knows whence they came to us. All strangers – a Moscovite, or a Mongol from Siberia¹. I tell you, there are as many of them here as there are burdocks on this four-legged proletariat. All these pot-bellied, full-faced lechers with briefcases. It seems that fat would spurt out if you pricked one with a knife. They move about with these briefcases all the time, here and there, like crazy. It's disgusting to look at them. They run around, the accursed ones, and jabber: 'We will build a new world.' And where, one may ask, did they start building this new world? Where? At the cemetery! Yesterday one lecher started to enlighten me, 'You, Borys,' stuck to me a Party leach, 'you, Borys, just think.' And I told him, 'Let the mare think, she has a big head, and as for me I worry only what to put in my mouth to chew.' But he continued, 'Just think what deeds the Party and Stalin are doing! Great deeds!' And I said to him, 'Great and strange are your deeds, father Stalin – one drinks tea, but the belly is cold and empty.' So I said to him, only not as loud as I am saying it to you now, but more quietly. Would you like to have something to eat?"

"I don't. I..."

"Here, take it. I was in the kitchen and hid a piece of bread in my pocket. Here, take it."

"Thanks, God is my witness, I don't want to."

"You'll be sorry if you don't. Take it. I'll give it to you. It seems you are a kin soul, from the village. But these lechers, if they asked me for cold water, I would give them boiling tar. I swear to God, I would! Let them drink it. But you aren't even listening. Is it so hard to listen to me? When I share my thoughts with someone, I feel better. But you, I see, don't even want to..."

¹ Villages, depopulated during the Holodomor, were settled by Russians. Rafael Lemkin calls it "the fragmentation of the Ukrainian people... by the addition to Ukraine of foreign peoples and by the dispersion of the Ukrainians throughout Eastern Europe. In this way, ethnic unity would be destroyed and nationalities mixed."

“I’m listening, good man, I’m listening, but... Dear man, my child is here. Her name is Olenka. Perhaps you know her? With dark eyes and a birthmark on her neck. Perhaps you remember?”

“There are so many of them, one can’t really notice them all,” and the stooped man ruffled his already disheveled hair. “She isn’t here?” - his eyes shifted to the sand.

“No, she isn’t. My Olenka is a bit bigger than the one sitting there. She started her eighth year.”

“And my Hafyka was nine. She died in my arms. And my wife on the floor. And now, I swear to God, in the evening when I am all alone, they come to me. They come to me and sit quietly in the dark corner...And they look at me...I don’t see them. Only their starving eyes glow...and glow. I put beet soup and bread for them on the table. But they don’t want to eat. They just look at me. They stare. I beg and beseech them – don’t stare at me. I didn’t cause your death. It was the Soviet regime that starved you to death. But they are silent, and only their eyes glow and glow in the dark corner. It’s the truth. They don’t touch the food I put on the table for them. They only stare. You don’t believe me?”

“I believe you.”

“One can see that you are from the village. But here, whoever I tell, they all laugh. But it isn’t funny?”

“No, it isn’t.”

“Are you serious?”

“Yes, I am.”

“Swear it!”

“I swear to God, good man.”

“Oh, how kind the people from our village are! Not like the lechers. So, you are saying that Olenka is not here in the sand?”

“I’ve looked and she’s not.”

“Perhaps she is with the older children. The older ones, it seems, went on a trip.” He looked through the fence. “Here they come. Do you hear them? Do you hear them sing ‘Thank you, Communist Party?!’ It’s disgusting! The lechers have taught them such songs. Yesterday I tried to teach them ‘Dnipro Is Roaring,’² but one of those with briefcases told me to shut up. You see, my voice is bourgeois and not Soviet. A hopeless lecher, a burdock, a flea...”

He continued to complain, but the woman didn’t hear him anymore. She jumped up and ran into the street...Her kerchief came down onto her forehead...

² “Dnipro Is Roaring” is a very popular Ukrainian song set to the words of Taras Shevchenko, describing Ukraine’s largest river during a storm.

She tore off her kerchief and squeezed it in her hand – and thus, disheveled, she froze up... Her whole being – a gaze. How much anxiety, and hope, and suffering was there in her gaze!

The children are walking and singing... Is her Olenka singing with them, too? Will she recognize her, her mother, after such a long separation?

Holding hands and in pairs, the children are approaching... Closer and closer... The woman stands motionless... She is as lifeless as a statue carved from gray flint... The bundle and the odd toy are at her feet. The kerchief is in her hand and her eyes are full of tears...

It seems that she is ready to run to the children and embrace them with all her being, with her eyes, her graying hair, and her cloak, or turn into dust and disperse among them.

The children are approaching the gate. The woman, staring steadily at the singing children, goes slowly to meet them. The children's heads glimmer in her eyes. One, two, ten... Which one resembles most her dear Olenka, with her hair the color of ripe golden grain?

Suddenly one little girl trips and falls backwards. Dark eyes... fair hair... It's she! It's she!

The woman utters a groan and dashes to her....

“Olenka! Is that you? Does it hurt?”

The little girl gets up, shakes off the dust, and looks at the woman with her dark eyes, full of fear.

“Don't touch me! I don't know you! You are an old beggar.”

“I thought... You resemble my Olenka...”

“I'm not your Olenka. You are a beggar-woman. Dirty. And your braids are like those of a witch. You are a witch!”

“I'm not a witch, my child. I am a mother. I'll comb my hair, wash up, and you will see that I am a mother. Just like your mother.”

“My mother was a thief.³ She stole grain from the field. Yet, she was pretty, but you are frightening and ugly...”

A little girl forces her way through the crowd that gathered around them and seizes the woman's homespun burlap skirt.

“Mother! You came!”

“My Olenka!”

³ On August 7, 1932, Stalin drafted a law, known as “Five ears of grain,” which carried a death sentence or ten years' imprisonment for “theft of socialist property.” People were executed for taking grain from the fields which they had previously owned.

“It isn’t true, mother! You are not, you are not ugly.” The girl tears herself off from the woman and kicks her friend with her feet. “My mother is not a witch; she is pretty, prettier than yours. She is a hundred times, or even more, prettier than yours! Mother, please comb your hair and show her that you are not a witch.”

“My child! My treasure!”

“Mother, comb your hair and show...”

“I will comb my hair,” and, with trembling hands, the woman straightens her hair.

“You see, you see, my mother is beautiful. And you have scabs. And your mother did not like our regime, and she stole grain from the regime. And my mother loves the Soviet regime⁴. True, mother, you do love?”

“I do love, Olenka, I do love. But be quiet, please.”

“Let Nadia be quiet. Her mother is a thief.”

“And your father is against the Soviet regime!” Nadia shots back. “He doesn’t like Comrade Stalin. And your mother abandoned you here at the shelter, and your head was covered with scabs. And yes, your legs were swollen. And yes, your mother abandoned you and ran away who knows where.”

“My mother didn’t run away. She was hungry, but she loves the Soviet regime.

Mother, you didn’t run away?”

The woman takes the girl into her arms and, covering her with kisses, takes her away from the group.

“You recognized me, Olenka?”

“Of course, mother! And why is your hair so gray? From starvation?”

“No, because I love so much.”

“Who? Our regime?”

“You, Olenka. That’s why my hair became gray.”

Encircling the child’s head with her hand, the woman keeps kissing her hair, and the child, clinging to her mother, keeps repeating:

“It’s you; it’s you, mother... How did you find me?”

“See, I did find you,” and the mother’s tears fall on her child’s fair hair. The children crowd around and observe the scene with fascination.

“She’s happy...Olenka is happy...She has a mother...”

“She’s happy, but not too happy. Her mother is old and ugly.”

⁴ From an early age, children were indoctrinated and trained to accept the Soviet propaganda and, in fact, to spy on their parents and report them to authorities for any remarks against the regime.

“And we don’t even have an ugly one,” contend the girls and wipe the tears off their faces. “We don’t have one, but Olenka has a mother. She’s happy.”

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The mother held Olenka by the hand and led her to the main building. “I will tell them everything, everything. I will bare my soul. How I found this place, how I was lost without you, and how I searched for you.”

“And will we have food at home?”

“We will, my child, we will. At that time we didn’t have a crumb. But now... Tomorrow we’ll be home. You’ll see Mykola,” the mother cooed and sparks of joy shimmered in her eyes. “Wait for me outside, my child. I will first go in myself.”

The woman paused... She hesitated in front of the wide door with a sign: “Director.”

She held her breath and knocked on the door.

“Come in!” she heard through the door.

She went in and stood at the threshold. A small room. Bars on the window. On one side of the room – a table covered with a blue cloth. On the table – some papers, a telephone, a bronze statue of the “dear leader,” and a metal inkwell.

In the chair – a youngish fellow with a goatee, pinkish cheeks like a ripe apple, and a double chin. His eyes were so small that instead of eyes he seemed to have tiny holes pierced with a spindle, on his balding figure.

With clenched teeth, he uttered in a shrill voice: “Sit down!” - and the woman sat down timidly on the edge of the chair.

The man propped his goatee with his fist and kept turning over some papers, once in a while looking into them – then finally he lifted his head.

“Why don’t you say Hello? Are you angry?”

“I forgot. I have so many problems... I forgot. Please forgive me.”

“Do you believe in God?”

“How can one not believe in God? I do believe.”

“So let your God forgive you, but we remember everything. She comes in like a werewolf and not a word.”

“I wish you a good day.”

“Better late than never. So why are you here?”

“My child is here. I want to take her home.”

“Yes, yes, I’ve heard. You made quite a commotion here. So you are saying that Lena Lubimova is your daughter?”

“Yes, my daughter, as God is my witness!”

“Hold your tongue, I know better than your witness. Your name?” he squealed, plucking his already thin goatee.

“Maria Koval.”

“Well then, Koval, and the girl who you claim is your daughter is Lena Lubimova. Are they similar?”

“Please listen to me, good man...Have pity on me and listen to me...I will tell you everything...”

“For example?”

“Not for example, but the whole truth.”

“With pleasure, let me listen.”

The man stretched himself out comfortably in a rotating chair, turned it around once or twice, lit his pipe and with evident pleasure let the smoke out to the ceiling.

“Start, I’m ready.”

“You know, I don’t even know how to start. My heart is breaking...”

“It’s okay. Let it break. If necessary, we’ll sew it together. Start talking.”

The woman lowered her eyes to the floor, and as if reading from it and stammering quite often, she started to relate her story:

“I, good man, had three children. Olenka was the youngest one. I worked like a slave, I didn’t care about my health...Every day from early morning till late at night... Earning a piece of dry bread for them. Believe me I myself didn’t have enough food and enough sleep. All I did was run around to get some food for them... But what could I bring them? A piece of bread, a bunch of beets, some potatoes...No matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t feed them. It was heart-wrenching to see the three of them hungry. But why am I telling you this. You probably know yourself how hard it is with children when there is not enough food. You have children, too?”

“I don’t need children of my own,” the “good man” let out together with the cigar smoke to the ceiling. “The shelter is full of children, more than a hundred, whose parents have abandoned them here. There are enough problems with those. And you... but continue. You are saying that you had a hard time with the children.”

“Oh, what a hard time! The winter was approaching – there was no bread and nothing else. There were no shoes, no clothes, and no food. People were beginning to starve in the village.”

“Starve, you are saying. Oh, dear me, how terrible! How dreadful! I got goose-bumps from fright. Well, go ahead, continue!”

“I became ill, and I could hardly walk...I couldn’t even think about work. My children scattered in different directions...They wandered from house to house begging for food...But what could they get when practically everyone was swollen from starvation?”

Every day someone died in one of the houses... My older son, Petryk, was the first to succumb. His lips became parched, his face ashen and spotted, and his legs, believe me, swelled up like logs. When the poor child lay down on the hearthstone, he didn't get up to the very end... And when he died, I swear to God, I didn't have enough strength to carry him to the cemetery. I buried him near the stable... I dug up a big hole between the oak and the cherry tree. On the bottom, I spread a thick linen sheet, saved from my maiden years, and covered him with a dilapidated, beggarly overcoat. I buried him myself... And now I was left with two children. They would clutch my skirt and whimper. They stretched out their arms and asked for food... Sometimes, I couldn't stand it anymore – and I would yell, 'Take me and eat me!' But they didn't understand, and they wouldn't leave me alone... They continued to beg for food...

I knew in advance that in a week or two – it would be their turn... And they, just like Petryk, would be stilled on the hearthstone. I started to look for help. How could I save them from death?

Luckily, my neighbor gave me life-saving advice. He told me what to do. And I held fast to his words.

One day I left Mykola, my middle son, with his godfather, and I went to Cherkasy with Olenka. Twenty kilometers from us. At that time Olenka was almost six years old.

On the way, I told her what to expect. I told her everything... About the famine and about her older brother who didn't get up from the hearthstone. I wanted to save Olenka... That's why I made the decision. Well, you understand, I made the decision to put her in the children's shelter. Perhaps she didn't understand everything I had told her... Because she continued to cry and look mournfully into my eyes... We reached the city. By now Olenka knew what to tell strangers after I had left near the shelter: she is an orphan, without a father or a mother, and she doesn't remember her name. 'If you don't tell them that,' I told her, 'they will not take you into the shelter, and you will die just like Petryk did on the hearthstone.'

She held on to my skirt even tighter, and word by word she repeated what I had taught her on the way.

We walked throughout the city for a long time until we finally found the children's shelter.

I kissed Olenka and sent her to the gate. And, from afar, I followed her with my eyes... Olenka walked near the fence, stopping and looking back all the time... And with my hand I motioned to her to keep on walking... After a while I ran away from that place...

The woman stopped talking and bowed down even lower. Her shoulders started to shiver...

"So," after an oppressive silence, the man with the goatee uttered slowly and carefully, as if putting each word on the scale for verification. "So, you deserted your child in front of the gate and fled. Yes?"

"It seems so."

“Funny.”

“Very funny,” the woman uttered with despair and straightened herself up. “Very funny.”

“And what happened next? You mean to tell me you disappeared from that street?”

“Yes, I went away. And immediately, without my dear child, I became empty. I felt ugly and loathsome. I was beside myself. I didn’t even see the path in front of me – I was completely drowned in tears. I came home, and my home was empty and cold. And I myself wounded and broken...As if I were dead. I took my son and set off through villages, treading upon mud and snow and harassing the dogs...To beg for whatever charity...

Later on...every Sunday I would ride or walk to Cherkasy. Like a criminal, I would hide at the corner of the street near the shelter and wait...And when they took the children for a walk, I would gaze at my orphan. I would gaze and grieve...I wept incessantly...And cursed and cursed my broken life.

One Sunday, however, I couldn’t find my fair-haired child. I found out that many children from that shelter had been transferred to different places. My Olenka already had a different name... I didn’t know that name...And I couldn’t find her, my little treasure, no matter how hard I tried. I searched for her a whole year - in vain. But now, thank God, I found her...”

The woman smiled kind-heartedly and looked amiably at the “goatee”. “Thank God I found her,” she repeated cordially once again.

“Very devout,” and the “goatee” knocked on the table with his pipe. “Pious.”

“People say that without God one can’t even reach the threshold.”

“Not even the threshold, you say?” - he muttered, but his thoughts were somewhere else, not in this room. “And so you trudged here to take your child home?”

“I didn’t trudge. I flew here like a bird. It seemed that my feet didn’t even touch the ground.”

“Flew? Did you see such wonder?! And for what? To invent devil knows what? To tell me something out of this world!”

The woman shuddered. “You don’t believe me, my dear man, that Olenka is my daughter? She has a birthmark on her neck and a scar on her hand. Honest to God! I...”

“Enough with your God!” - he cut her off impatiently, “and stop your cackling. Tell me who told you these wild lies about starvation?”

“Who? I saw it myself...I suffered myself... I was starving...”

“Okay,” - the man shot back and jumped from the chair. “Tell me, where was your husband at the time? Why didn’t he choose to suffer with you? Where did he, the cursed one, disappear?”

“They took him.”

“When?” The “goatee” chuckled, and his tiny eyes flashed with malicious sparks...It was clear that he knew better than the woman when and how it happened. “When, you remember?”

“In thirty-one,” the woman answered as if waking up from an oppressive dream. “He was a treasure of a man. Always busy at the farm, enterprising, hardworking. And then one night a car drove into our yard. They broke into the house and turned everything upside down... They were looking for some papers...And they took him.”

“Yes, yes,” hummed the man with the goatee, walking to and fro in the room. It seems that he, my dove, wasn’t simply taken, he was repressed. So, I pity your battered feet.”

“What do you say?” The woman didn’t quite understand what he was trying to say.

“I’m saying that you came here in vain. As for your child, you have to wait.”

“What do you mean ‘wait’?”

“Simple. She’ll stay here in the shelter.”

The woman stood up, throwing up her hands as if trying to catch something and approached the table.

“Is it possible...Is it possible...I can’t take back my own child? I am grateful to you and everyone else for giving her food. But...Is it possible...How can she remain here...without her mother... in this prison?”

Suddenly, the “goatee” banged the table with his fist, as tender and plump as a doughnut. His face became crimson, and his eyes became listless.

“What right are you looking for?! What kind of prison is it?! It’s clear that you know how to slander us!”

“I’m not slandering you.”

“Be quiet! We have seen this type quite often! Trash! She wanted to run around and have a good time, so she got rid of her children, and now she rambles and talks nonsense about starvation. Like a fool, you babbled on about what you think of our regime. You betrayed yourself immediately. It is clear that you are an enemy of the people!”

“I’m not an enemy of the people. I want to protect... I want to take my child away.”

“Oh, you see, she wants to protect her child! She wants to take her away so that she could confuse her later on, deceive her, and teach her to hate and curse us.”

“I will not deceive my child.”

“Go on, go on. I know what I’m talking about,” and hurriedly he dug into the papers, pulled out a sheet and shook it before the woman’s face. “Here it’s written black on white how you raised your child. When she came into the shelter, all she did was recite ‘Our Lord’ and ‘Hail Mary.’ But she knew nothing about Comrade Stalin. So, what do you have to say now?”

“Give me back my child!”

“If you were decent, we would give her back to you, but you are not decent.”

“I’m decent. You yourself are not decent,” and at once the woman resorted to the familiar “you”, full of disdain. “Olenka is mine! Mine!”

“Not yours, but ours!”

“You heartless slave. May you be cursed!” And the woman lifted her fists and covered her eyes.

“Oh, you are even rebelling, threatening. Shaking your fists against the government! You bourgeois!⁵ I’ll take care of you immediately!”

He rang the bell. A robust figure straightened out with slave-like obedience at the threshold.

“Take her away, but use the side passage, so that the children will notice it less,” uttered the “goatee” in a soft, almost silky voice. And then to the woman louder and in a harsher tone, “You bourgeois garbage! You’ll have a chat in a different place.”

As if mowed down, the woman made a step and fell to the floor. “Olenka!”

They helped her get up. They took her by the hand and led her out of the room.

The “goatee” stood motionless. He then stroked his double chin and shouted in the direction of the woman:

“Olenka! Olenka is not for you, you bourgeois!”

The door closed with a squeak.

•

The “goatee” went outside into the yard. He stood there, leaning on a tree, and looked around, with a bored expression on his face.

“Borys! Borys! Fetch me Lena Lubinova from room 16! Do you hear me?”

“I hear you. I’m not deaf,” Borys, the one who complained to the woman about the detestable lechers with briefcases, responded in a threatening tone. “Why bellow? I hear you!”

“What a boorish man you are! You can’t talk like a human being.”

“You want me to sing to you like a nightingale? You won’t live to hear it. I speak as I know how to. What are you to me? Are you my kinsman, my brother, or a good person,

⁵ The Russians branded independent-minded people who did not support the Soviet regime as “bourgeois,” or “bourgeois nationalists,” implying that they were “enemies of the people” and thus subject to persecution and arrest. Many of these people were later found in mass graves, such as Vinnytsia, where more than 10,000 victims were buried and Bykivnia, near Kyiv, where more than 100,000 were buried.

so that I should speak to you in a sweet voice?! You are nothing to me, nothing at all, or even less.”

“Be quiet!”

“What about it? Are you going to take me like this unfortunate woman? The poor woman walked here all the way from the village, and you put her behind bars? I’m not afraid of jail. You found your match, brother. Why are you cutting her life short?”

“It’s not your business. Don’t put your nose in someone else’s business, or you’ll die early.”

“Don’t try to frighten me. I have been frightened before. The woman is all heart. You are not worthy to kiss that woman’s chapped feet.”

“Get away from my shelter, you monster!” and, in a rage, with a cock-like hostility, the “goatee” was ready to attack Borys. “Get away!”

“Just you come near me,” said Borys, using the familiar “you” and showed the “goatee” his muscular soiled fist. “Look what I’ll make out of you...Don’t chase me out of the shelter. I’ll run away from here myself. And don’t gape at me because I’ll hit you in your fat mouth so that juice will flow from it. Look at him, a veritable leech, a Party animal, see how he opened his big mouth. You, parasite, saw how emaciated, how wretched this woman is. It was you who tormented her so that she is skin and bones, and you fattened yourself at her expense. Look at him, how chubby-cheeked he is! If one would prick you with a needle, fat would spurt out from your face. It’s disgusting to look at you. There are as many of you devils here as there are fleas on that dog.”

“Be quiet!”

“Oh, I won’t be quiet. You shut yourself up. I don’t fear anything anymore. I’m sick and tired to look at you lechers with briefcases. You have eaten into my very heart. I’m tired, you hear me!.. Because in the evening Hafiyka comes to me...My wife comes to me... And they sit in the corner... Hungry... And they look at me...But how chubby-faced all of you lechers are... just take a needle and pierce...”

The “goatee” sprang up and ran inside his office, but Borys kept cursing and complaining in the middle of the yard...

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When two strong men dragged Borys across the yard, the children looked at them with fear.

“He doesn’t like the Soviet government.”

“How do you know?”

“I know. This is how they dragged my mother. But she was a thief...”

From the building, where the “goatee” had his office, Olenka ran out crying bitterly and covered her face with her hands.

“Lena! What happened? Aren’t you going home with your mother?”

“No, I’m not. My mother is like the one who is being dragged,” and she pointed to Borys. “Just like him. My mother is a bourgeois.”

“What kind?”

“A simple bourgeois...” and, overflowing with tears, she went inside.

The children went away silently. Later on, one could hear the sound of a piano.

*“I don’t know of any other country,
Where a man can breathe so freely”*

– the children’s high-pitched, colorful voices rang out.

It was getting dark...

