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Fred E. Beal on stand; Judge Barnhill presiding. Gastonia,
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PROLETARIAN JOURNEY

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FRED E. BEAL

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XXII. FAMINE

1

THE Stalin dictatorship frowned on any attempts on the part of even foreign Communists to see what was going on in the country. When I organized an expedition at Kharkov for some members of the foreign colony to go out into the villages, the G.P.U. immediately quashed the idea. One fall day, in 1932, a Russian factory worker and I started on a long hike out into the countryside. We started early in the morning of our rest day and arrived back home very late at night. I will call my friend Maxim. I don't want to get him into trouble with his masters. The things we saw are not what the visitor to Russia sees. The tourists would see only the special farms. One of these is the G.P.U. Commune located in the Kharkov district. It is called the "Red Star." The peasants working on this farm are hand-picked members of the Communist Party and the Young Communist League. They are well-fed and housed. The cows are contented and the tractors, under the management of strapping young shock troopers, actually plow the fields. But 95 per cent of the collectives and state farms are radically different from this.

Maxim and I hiked south from our place, crossing the ravine in back of the tractor plant town where the beggars stewed up the fish bones and we passed the new laundry beyond, the new laundry which never seemed to be in running order!

After some miles of walking, we came upon two men

and a woman working in a field. We knew they were DOPR (prisoners' corps) workers, but we wanted them to tell us. At first the woman, whose uncovered legs were all broken out with boils and scabby places, started to run. One of the men called her back, saying that it was an "Inostranetz" (foreigner).

"Why did you run?" Maxim asked.

"I was afraid the police had come to shoot me," she answered.

"Why should they shoot you?"

"Because they took my husband and my son. They killed them, I'm sure, and now they want to kill me," the woman cried and became hysterical. With this she fell heaving to the ground, pounding and flaying it with her fists.

The man who had called her back explained her case to us. The father and son had been shipped to some unknown place for failure to make the quota. The quota is the tax in kind set by the Soviet Commissars. It had to be met—or else! This woman did not want to run away from this vicinity, because she hoped she might hear from her husband and son some day. The man told us the story of his own past. He was a cabinet maker. During the war, he was captured by the Germans and put to work at his trade. Considering conditions in Germany at the time, he was making a comfortable living. Then the Bolshevik Revolution broke out in Russia. As he was a Socialist he went back to his native land to help build Socialism. He fought in the Red Army against the White Armies and, after they were defeated, he became a member of the Communist Party. He followed the leadership of Lenin because Lenin had promised land to the peasants. He received a small bit of land and had worked hard and was beginning to prosper.

He owned a cow, a horse and a plow and always met his taxes until the Government began to make them impossible to meet. A year and a half before he was short four bushels of wheat and three of potatoes. They sentenced him to forced labor, one year for each bushel short of the required tax! Now he was a convict.

"There seems to be no one watching you, why don't you run away?" I asked.

"What for . . . where will I go? Here I get some bread every day and all the tomatoes I can steal. If I run away, I'll starve."

I thought of the Sokolnike Prison and that other show-place, Bolshevo, near Moscow, where the prisoners never ran away. And how the Bolsheviks boasted of it! How the tourists had marveled at the supposed model Soviet penal system!

"What else do you get to eat?" asked Maxim of the prisoner.

"Nothing . . . nothing else at all, other than a pound and a quarter of bread a day. If we walked eight miles we could get borsch (soup) with sun-flower seed oil on top. But we would rather steal tomatoes. Want one?" He took from his faded blouse three or four small tomatoes and offered them on the palm of his hand. We hesitated. "Please take one, it is all I can offer you."

We did and our cabinet maker and his two prison comrades looked happy. In return we gave them a box of matches. Even a measly box of matches made them happy! Now, they could boil the tomatoes and make a soup!

We went on and saw many others like these working the field in a dazed and feeble way. This was a State farm (Sovhoz) and the majority of the peasants were prisoners. All were in a bad condition, weak and under-

nourished. Miles further, we came to a collective farm. Here we met a woman with two buckets of water swinging on a stick over her shoulder. Nearby was a village of thatched houses. We asked the woman for some milk, offering to pay for it.

"We have no milk," she replied. "We haven't had any for six months."

"Isn't this a collective?" asked Maxim.

"Yes, this is a collective." And we couldn't get another word out of her.

We went on to the houses through a wide field of weeds and tomatoes. The weeds were higher than the tomatoes and absorbing all the nourishment from the ground. The tomatoes were sickly and small. A woman sat close by under the shade of a tree.

"Comrade, why don't some of you get out and pull the weeds? They are choking the tomatoes," I said.

"What for?" she answered us. "We had some nice tomatoes last year and the government came and took them all away from us. The same with the potatoes and everything else we raised. We had nothing to live on through the winter. Citizen, do you think *I* can pull all those weeds? There were two thousand of us here once. Now there are only about one hundred left, and God knows what will happen to the rest of us this winter!"

"And where are the rest?"

"They died or ran away. Now, there are only a few children and one sick cow."

My friend Maxim and I continued our journey through the Ukrainian countryside and wandered around a village on the way to the Stalin Commune

which was our destination. In the backyard garden of one of the thatched houses we found two boys of about fourteen. Here the vegetables looked healthy, compared with the sickly products of the fields. One of the boys was hale and strong, as if the earth had given him the best it had. The other looked starved and listless. We asked the healthy one:

"Is this your garden?"

"Yes, and my father's."

"Where is your father and the other people of this collective?"

"They are out stealing tomatoes!"

The straightforwardness of this answer amazed me. Maxim said it was because I was a foreigner. The lad had no fear of foreigners.

"Aren't your father and the other people afraid of being arrested for stealing tomatoes, and can't you get them from the collective?"

"We'll die if we don't get the tomatoes, and we can't get them from the collective. We have no flour or anything except what comes from these gardens. The government took all our food."

The listless boy said he came with his mother from a long way off, he didn't know where. His mother had died in a field near this collective and the father of the healthy one took him into his home. The starveling had some vague recollections of his father fighting soldiers. These children were raised since the Revolution. They know nothing about the old ways except what they have heard from the older folks.

"I like my own garden best," the healthy one ventured, pointing to it proudly.

We gave the lads a few lumps of sugar, a luxury in these parts, and went on in the direction of the Stalin

Commune, advertised as one of the highest Communist achievements. Mile after mile we walked through uncultivated ground. Maxim said it hadn't been cultivated for over two years. As far as the eye could see, the land was barren save for weeds. At other times, I saw similar vast stretches of idle ground. Yet at this very time the *Moscow News* was telling Americans that Ukraine was one hundred per cent cultivated! Near a brook, we came upon the decomposed body of a man. Flies, ants and worms were feeding on his remains. We had seen numerous fresh graves marked with crude Greek crosses pushed into the earth, and skeletons of horses and cows. But this was the first dead human being in the open we saw that day. Another hour's walk and we came to a wheat field, or I should say a weed and wheat field. Maxim pulled at the wheat and showed me a few undeveloped kernels. "The wheat is sick, the weeds are thriving." At last, we came upon two men plowing a field with a tractor. A real tractor it was and running, too. A young man, the driver, was cursing the older man for not being able to hold down the plow.

"You're not digging deep enough," said Maxim.

"It's the fault of this old bag of bones!" complained the young man.

The older one, who was doing his best to bear down on the plow, got somewhat excited. He must have thought we were government officials. "Citizens, I'm doing my best, but I don't know this thing!" he cried and pointed to the tractor. "If they would give me a 'sokha' (wooden plow), I'd show them."

We went on to a small group of houses, passing in the field an abandoned John Deere Combine of late model. It was rusted and out of order. A few more rains and it would probably be beyond repair. I wondered how

many thousands of bushels of grain were taken from the peasants to pay for it in American dollars. The group of houses was the Stalin Commune. Inside the largest of these was a row of cots. Each cot, made up, was covered with a single gray blanket. The place was empty except for the cook and a helper in the kitchen making supper. The workers of the Commune would be back from the fields in half an hour, said the cook. We could meet them. We rested ourselves.

Now, at the "Red Star" Commune, of the G.P.U., the workers had come rushing in from work, happy, full of life and energy. But not these men and women. They dragged themselves in sad, hungry, and completely exhausted. They sat at the table like so many mechanical men, not talking to each other, just waiting, each with a tin spoon in his hand, for the cabbage soup to come. A dirty-aproned kitchen girl brought in a trayful of bowls of soup. Hundreds of flies followed her as she deposited each bowl, with a slice of bread, in front of each worker. The soup course was followed by hot tea, without sugar.

They were mostly young people, thin and gaunt. They stared at Maxim and me in silent resentment, I thought, at our presence. The manager came in and sent them back to the fields again. He asked us what we wanted and who gave us permission to come there. I showed him my special documents and told him I was a political refugee. He became almost obsequious. I asked why conditions were so bad on the Commune. He did not agree that they were bad. "We are much better off here than on the collectives," he said. He had been manager of the Commune only a short time. The previous manager had been "removed" for inefficiency. Many of the workers had run away, too.

"Why did they run away?" I asked.

"Because they would rather work in the factories."

"But we don't give them work at the factories! We have enough workers in our factory!" I protested.

"Comrades, that is my answer!"

We left him and talked with a barefoot girl, who straggled behind those walking through the field. "Why do they run away from here?" I repeated the question to her.

"Because there is nothing to eat and too much driving," she offered unhesitatingly. When she found out that I was from America, she wanted to know if America had Communes and if the people there were dying from hunger as the manager had told them. "He said the workers in America live worse than we do. Is this true?"

I couldn't think of any worse food I had consumed in America, save perhaps in one or two of the jails I had been in.

3

In the spring of 1933, when the last of the winter snows had melted away, I made a random visit to a Ukrainian collective near the village of Chekhuyev. In company with a Russian-American comrade from the factory, I took the train from our little station of Lossevo and rode for two hours to Chekhuyev. From this place, we walked east for several miles. We met not a living soul. We came upon a dead horse and a dead man upon the side of a road. The horse still lay harnessed to the wagon. The man was still holding the reins in his lifeless stiff hands. Both had died from starvation, it seemed. The atmosphere itself seemed filled with death and desolation.

The village we reached was the worst of all possible sights. The only human there was an old woman who passed us on the village street. She hobbled along with the aid of a stick. Her clothes were just a bunch of rags tied together. When she came close to us she lifted the stick as if to strike us but the movement petered out in weakness. She spat at us and mumbled something incoherent, something my friend could not make out, though he knew the language well. Her feet were dreadfully swollen. She sat down and pricked her swollen feet with a sharp stick, to let the water out of the huge blisters. There was a large hole in the top of her foot from continuous piercing of the skin. She was stark mad. She laughed when she sat down and screamed with pain when she squeezed her foot. She spat again at us. We moved on.

There was no other life. The village was dead. Going up to one of the shacks, we looked into a window. We saw a dead man propped up on a built-in Russian stove. His back was against the wall, he was rigid and staring straight at us with his faraway dead eyes. I shall always remember that ghastly sight. I have seen dead people who had died naturally, before. But this was from a cause and a definite one. A cause which I was somehow associated with, which I had been supporting. How that deathly gaze pierced me! How it caused me to writhe in mental agony! As I look back, I think that unforgettable scene had more effect than any other in deciding me to do what I could do to rectify my horrible mistake in supporting the Stalinists of Russia and the Third International.

We found more dead people in what had been their homes. Some bodies were decomposed. Others were fresher. When we opened the doors, huge rats would

scamper to their holes and then come out and stare at us.

At one house, there was a sign somehow printed on the door in crude Russian letters. My friend read it: "God bless those who enter here, may they never suffer as we have." Inside two men and a child lay dead with an icon alongside of them.

There was a sign on the door of another house. It read: "My son. We couldn't wait. God be with you." Two old people were dead in there. We took it to mean they couldn't wait for a food package to arrive, possibly from Moscow or even from America. Maybe their son had been in the Red Army; perhaps he was a factory worker. If it was food they had been waiting for, either the boy had not sent it or it had been stolen by some hungry mail-censor.

Many of the houses were empty. But, in the rear, the graves told a story of desolation and ghastly death. More signs were stuck up on these graves by those who buried them:

I LOVE STALIN. BURY HIM HERE AS SOON AS POSSIBLE!
THE COLLECTIVE DIED ON US!
WE TRIED A COLLECTIVE. THIS IS THE RESULT!

I had seen enough of villages and collectives and communes. On our way back, near the station, people told us that *that* village was to be burned. Three or four others in the vicinity had already been burned. Not a trace of the houses or of the dead bodies in them was left. A terrible weight of sadness and hopelessness settled upon me. These horrors could not make me hate the responsible ones any more than I did, but I felt completely helpless about getting out of Russia. And where to go? It would be hard to take up life again in the world outside without helpful friends, and most of

my friends were Communists or Communist sympathizers. They, perhaps, would hate me for upsetting their beliefs and illusions as to Stalin's glorious way out for mankind.

4

I was editor of the American Communist factory paper, *Tempo*, in the Kharkov Tractor Plant. My work often took me into the city of Kharkov ten miles distant. I constantly saw the most unbelievable tragedies. It was common to see people drop dead from starvation. On no occasion that I can remember did I fail to see a death from starvation during my travels to the city.

The Stalin dictatorship has one thing which works in its favor: the horrors of Soviet life are such that few people in the Western World could be brought to believe them. As I am writing this, it all seems like a ghoulisn dream. I've never been in an insane asylum, but I should compare my Russian memories to those of a man cured of insanity and trying to recollect the visions of a ghastly past. At the city bazaar I saw a woman lie down and die. Her begging days were over. Wrapped tight around her and hugging her breast was an infant sucking at her nipples. The people about paid little attention.

Death meant freedom! The few who hovered around shook their heads in utmost sorrow. A militiaman blew his whistle and when another came, they both took her body and the suckling to the police station. This police station was crowded all the time with homeless workers and peasants who had been picked up during the day. These were destined to receive a bullet of mercy or to be

shipped in cattle cars to some prison camp. On a visit to Odessa, I saw many such freight cars loaded with these unfortunate people. As they passed our train, I could smell the stench of these cooped-up beings. It was particularly terrible to see young people in these groups. But they were there, along with the old ones.

Once, I saw a lad of about nineteen walking in the gutter. He was smiling and brave-looking, as if he were proud of whatever he had done. Behind him was an officer with a drawn pistol. When an officer parades an individual down a Russian street with a drawn gun, it means *that* person is to be shot. Since capital punishment is reserved for political prisoners, other crimes receiving a maximum of ten years, it meant that the young fellow had committed some political act contrary to the wishes of the rulers. I wanted to cry out to the world: "*Save him! Save him!*" as I had done so many times for Sacco and Vanzetti! I wondered what Vanzetti, a simple noble being, would have said if he had lived to see the Russia of to-day?

Another young man, walking under police escort, but without guns, seized a loaf of bread from a fat woman standing at the curb. The woman, with three round loaves, seemed to be inviting some wretched one to make a pass for that bread. She screamed!

Before the policeman could take the bread from the youth, he had gulped down a few mouthfuls. The cop gave him a terrific shove, but the lad just laughed and laughed, as if to say: "It's in my stomach now, try and get it!"

I yelled: "Good for you, good for you!" The officer looked at me in puzzlement. Fortunately for me, he couldn't understand English.

There is a shallow river running through Kharkov.

So many people jumped into it in attempts to commit suicide that special guards were placed on the river banks to arrest the would-be suicides. On the part of some, it was a trick to get arrested and taken to jail, so that they might get a little to eat, if only a little.

5

In 1933, I had occasion to call on Petrovsky, the President of the Ukrainian Soviet Republic, in his office in Kharkov. I was accompanied by Erenburg, my superior in the cultural-propaganda work at the Tractor Plant. "Comrade Petrovsky," I said, "the men at our factory are saying millions of peasants are dying all over Russia. They see poverty and death all about them. They say that five million people have died this year, and they hold it up to us as a challenge and a mockery. What are we going to tell them?"

"Tell them nothing!" answered President Petrovsky. "What they say is true. We know that millions are dying. That is unfortunate, but the glorious future of the Soviet Union will justify that. Tell them nothing!"

Now the Ukraine is known as the bread-basket of Europe. Its soil is as rich as that of Nebraska, Iowa, and Kansas. That black earth will grow anything, given only the seed and care. What then was the cause of this general starvation? One of the answers is Stalin's forced collectivization. The peasants stubbornly fought the campaign ordered from the Kremlin. Their seeds were confiscated and distributed only to collective and state farms. Their horses and cows were expropriated. The right of disposing of their crops was denied the individual peasants. Farm implements were made unavailable to them. Heavy taxes were placed upon peasant

holdings and collected at the point of a gun. Scores of thousands were killed outright because they refused to go into the collectives. Red Army detachments were sent into the villages for that purpose. The inhabitants of hundreds of villages literally died in their tracks and, in thousands of other villages, the peasants abandoned their homes after the forcible seizure of from 60 to 90 per cent of their grain. Great numbers took to the roads, flocked to the cities, and wandered as far as their legs could carry them. The tragedy of these living corpses, who were often without even the customary rags in the coldest weather, was more grewsome than the tragedy of the dead.

Heart-rending was the condition of the great swarms of homeless children let loose by the Stalin policy. It should be remembered that this new crop of waifs was not inherited from the Tsarist régime, from the early period of the Revolution. The Stalinists have a way of blaming the Tsar and the World War of nearly two decades ago for the latest wave of homeless children. These youngsters hated the Soviet factories, the G.P.U. and all government institutions and restrictions. They preferred to ride freight trains, to beg, to steal. Their parents had been starved to death, shot, sent to concentration camps far away, or were still roaming over the land lost to their children forever. All the stations and railroads of the country were infested with these waifs. They had a way of getting through the cordons of guards despite the vigilance of the G.P.U. officials.

On a trip that I made to Moscow from Kharkov and back, I encountered many little derelicts pleading for food. I was on board the International train and ate in the restaurant car. Across from me sat a characteristic Soviet bureaucrat with shaven head. He carried a brief

case. Into this he put the remains of his meal, such as pieces of bread. Outside the window a dirty-faced kid, wearing a cap much too big for him, appealed to the bureaucrat: "*Dyadya, dai kusok khlieba!*" (Uncle, give me a piece of bread.)

"Go to work. You ought to be arrested for begging!" the bureaucrat said.

I gave the youngster my bread. The bureaucrat, who could speak English, told me that I should not spoil the waifs by giving them food.

"He is too young to work," I answered, estimating the boy's age to be about twelve.

"He could go to a Soviet institution," was the retort.

"But perhaps he does not want to go to an institution," I replied, thinking of the disgraceful Gorky Commune near Kharkov where the children received very little food and plenty of discipline.

"Well, he ought to be made to go! He and the rest are a nuisance to the government!"

Indeed, the more I saw of Russia the more convinced I became that not only the homeless children but all the common people of the country were a nuisance to the Soviet Government.

XXIII. "THIS IS NOT UNION SQUARE!"

1

A MIXED delegation of Americans, Englishmen, and Germans came to Kharkov. The local Intourist office notified us a few hours ahead that the visitors were scheduled to visit our plant and that we should have to serve them a meal at the foreigners' restaurant. Our director, Ravinsky, called for my chief Erenburg. "You and Beal," said Ravinsky to him, "get busy and clean up the place before the delegation arrives."

We had to get in touch with the Communist Party officials to remove the beggars and prepare a grand meal for the visitors. And how our officials like the latter duty! At a given signal, the agents of the G.P.U. and the Communist members, scattered throughout the grounds, pounced upon the weary, almost lifeless people who were either stewing some fish bones or pawing in the garbage for scraps of food. Some of the "beggars" were swaying with the wind beneath apartment windows, crying for bread. The raiders swooped down upon them and forced them in the direction of the corner house, known as A-1, because it was near the road, convenient for transportation.

I watched on the side lines, ashamed of being a party to the system that was murdering these innocent people. Often I thought: "It won't be long, I cannot stand it!" It was horrible to see the starved people dragged along the road, their bare swollen feet scraping against sharp