

# PART 1: KAMIANA

I, Ludmila, was born in a country both beautiful and austere; a land experiencing hot summers and freezing winters, a nation rich in farming and agriculture and containing huge mineral deposits, yet poor in security, stability, and safety. I was born in a land and an era of extreme contrasts.

I was born in the last month of spring, on the 21<sup>st</sup> of May, 1927. It was the leanest month of the year. What grass there was crunched underfoot, and the dams and creeks were dry. Kamiana, my birthplace, is situated on the Northern Steppe, black soil country bordered by areas of woodland where deer wandered. Kamiana was only a small village surrounded by rural farmland. In May, usually the newly planted crops of grain and vegetables thrived, the fruit trees and berries were flowering or in fruit, and the streams and ponds were full of fresh, clean water. But not when I was born.

During the years 1921-1923 the country was in famine. Poor grain harvests in those years meant that there was not enough seed for a complete crop to be sown. What was planted failed. 1924 again produced a poor grain harvest. Each season, there was not enough grain to plant a full crop for the next season. What was planted struggled. The grains would sprout but with not enough water, the plants yellowed, wilted, and died.

As crops continually failed and the rains did not come, along with the impositions placed on us by Stalin, Mama tried desperately to supplement our food by conserving every drop of water that she could. The used water from bathing, clothes washing and dish cleaning, Mama bucketed and carried out to her tiny, frugal vegetable garden, where she carefully poured out

the sudsy water onto the limp plants and parched soil, which greedily absorbed her small contributions. It was not enough, and the plants barely survived.

Mama would take me with her to forage for wild produce. In the fall we collected berries and plums where we could, and Mama would make compote out of them.

In the woods nearby, we collected acorns from the oak trees. The competition for these nuts was fierce. Everybody was foraging, as well as the wild animals. Those we did manage to collect, Mama roasted and ground them into a meal that was then steeped in boiling water and used as a beverage. The tilia trees (linden trees) also found in the woods yielded flowers, leaves and bark that were also steeped in boiling water and used as a drink.

Brassicas and native kale grew wild and when fermented was used for sauerkraut. The flowering heads could be eaten raw, and the seeds were often sprouted and used as a salad vegetable. This plant was very hardy, surviving temperature as low as -23 degrees.

Grass seeds, if you could find them, were used to make gruel or porridge. Native thyme grew in the spring and the green parts of the plant were edible and used as a seasoning. Rampion, known in the western world as campanula, bearing blue, bell-shaped flowers was a popular find. Its flowers could be eaten raw. The spinach-like leaves and radish-like roots were boiled together with milk and served as soup. However, demand for these wild foods was great and as the drought continued, even these resources depleted until there was nothing to glean.

In 1927, Russia had been expecting 7.7 million tons of grain from Ukraine, but only 5.4 million tons had been obtained. All the USSR was in need. Women, their breath condensing into misty plumes around their heads, in the bitterly cold temperatures, formed pitiful, seemingly static, and endless lines as they queued for unavailable food. People jostled each other. Often shouting and fighting broke out in their desperate attempt to get food. Tempers flared, tears over-flowed and hope began to fade.

I found a recent photo of Kamiana. My memory of my birthplace is very little, for I was there for only a brief couple

of years. In the photo, the sun was breaking through low cloud, sending pale golden and pink rays to illuminate the green, lush growth. It was taken in summer and the grass seed heads swayed in the breeze while gentle ponds reflected the scene. In the background, a Ukrainian Orthodox church with its octagonal roofed steeple, topped with a cross, shone in the soft northern sunlight.

Kamiana has two vastly different definitions; the first meaning was poetry, symmetry, and beauty. The second meaning, this time the German equivalent, was defined as gross, sordid, mean, and vulgar.

In reality, the landscape and history of Kamiana reflected both meanings at the time of my birth and childhood.

While life was hard, my people still farmed their own land, but the grim forces of change rumbled louder, drawing ever closer to the time when life as my people knew it would change forever.

I was named Ludmila, which means love for the people. But the people exercising power over me, and my fellow countrymen and women, had only hatred and contempt for us.

## GRAIN REQUISITIONS 1928

Although 1917 had seen the gaining of independence for Ukraine (albeit for only two years) and the overthrowing of the Czarist regime, living conditions in the Soviet Union in 1927 (10 years later) were still lower than they had been under the Czars.

To try to rectify this problem, Stalin, the president of the United Soviet States of Russia, (USSR) began placing edicts on the country and especially Ukraine. He saw Ukraine with its rich black soil as the breadbasket for the USSR. He regarded the Ukrainian people as a blot on the landscape, sub-humans whom he believed were best eradicated.

January 1928, Stalin ordered his government heads to mobilise brigades ready to enforce grain collection from the farms, especially from the kulaks (farm owners) of Ukraine. Harsh punishments were imposed on those refusing to pay.

Mama recalls the day when two Russians came to our farm. Papa was in the field.

Shouting at Papa, one of them demanded, 'You give us the required amount, or you will be charged for it.'

'With interest!' the second man shouted. Papa bowed his head. He would have to yield the grain. But not all of it. The interest demanded was 500%, five times the monetary value of the grain.

If the kulak or peasant did not or could not pay, and most couldn't, their land and possessions would be confiscated, and their belongings sold by auction. They would be homeless in a destitute land.

Mama and Papa talked after I had been put to bed. It was only much later that Mama told me of their conversation.

‘We must bury the grain,’ whispered Papa.

While I slept, Mama and Papa worked as silently as they could in the dark, carting and burying their grain in a desperate bid for survival. This scenario was repeated many times over on the neighbouring farms.

Added to this hardship, the weather of 1928 continued to work against our people. When it was time to harvest, rain set in, resulting in another poor harvest. 23,000 died during this time from hunger and another 80,000 perished from associated diseases.

We were afraid of what was to come: famine, more requisitions, economic collapse, or war. My people knew that if we worked badly, we would go hungry. We also knew if we worked well, we would be punished by the state. Neither situation would give Stalin the grain he wanted.

In 1929, Stalin came up with the answer to his dilemma – collectivisation. Concurrently, the first arrests under Stalin of Ukrainian intellectuals, artists, technical experts, writers, and scientists were made. All were found guilty and were sent to the Gulag (Russian forced-labour camps) or prisons. Many were executed.

The fully-fledged assault against our people had begun. I was two years old.

## TRANSPORTATION OF PETLYURA SUPPORTERS-1929

My recollections of my grandparents are few and vague, things like Dido's thick wiry beard and Babushka's soft sad face.

They were supporters of Symon Petlyura, who gained independence for our country, Ukraine, in 1917. When our independence was lost in 1919 and the Bolshevik rule took over, many supporters were taken and transported to Siberia and other sparsely populated areas in the sub-arctic region of Russia. By 1921, Russia had 84 forced-labour camps, known in Russia as corrective labour camps. Collectively, they were called the Gulag. From 1929 until Stalin's death, there was a rapid expansion of these camps.

I was two when the Bolsheviks came for Dido and Babushka. Dido's chair, where I ran each morning to be picked up and cuddled by him, was empty. Running to Mutti, she silently picked me up. I reached up and traced the tears running down her face. Looking over to my papa, he sat at the head of the table cradling his face in his hands. Babushka was not in the room either. I was too young to comprehend, but I felt it. The heaviness, the grief and the fear wrapped themselves around me and I sensed something bad had happened, though I didn't know what.

In the gulag, the prisoners worked in the gold mines and the salt mines or worked on tree felling. They were forced to work up to fourteen hours a day in extreme sub-arctic weather. Their clothing did not keep them warm. When their shoes worn out, they had to make do. Food was almost nil, maybe a bowl of weak fishbone soup and one slice of bread a day. Hundreds of prisoners, Dido and Babushka included, died of starvation, disease, exhaustion, hypothermia, or execution. They didn't come back.

## COLLECTIVISATION-1929

Papa, tired and dusty from working on the farm, pulled off his heavy boots at the back door and, with sagging shoulders and leaden steps, trudged into the kitchen.

‘Oh, Mutti, surely that’s not borsch in the pot. I am starving.’

The fireplace warmed our whole house. A single chimney rose from the centre of our thatched roof, taking away the smoke but containing the warmth inside. We were lucky, for we had a wooden floor, while many of the village homes had only earthen floors. A woven rag-rug striped in red, orange, and yellow lay on the floor and our wooden table was scrubbed clean. When not in use it was covered with a brightly embroidered tablecloth.

The small, multi-paned windows, inset with generous sills and framed with embroidered shawls, let in enough light to cheer the inside of our farmhouse, yet small enough to help retain the heat from the fire.

A large chest painted with folk art designs and covered with cushions, provided seating as well as storage. By the fireplace stood earthenware pots and a spinning wheel. A big metal pot was suspended above the fire, with the borsch (a rich beetroot and vegetable soup) simmering gently. A wreath of wheat and dried flowers adorned a wall, and one corner of the room held an altar with its icons of Mary, Jesus, and the Cross.

A kerosene lamp, suspended above the dining table gave a soft warm glow to our room at night. A day bed against a wall, decorated with rugs, did double duty as a bed at night and a lounge by day. There was a wealth of colour in our home with red being the predominant colour.

Our home spoke of warmth and welcome, of happiness and health. Yet, in its shadows lay the struggle and strife and etched

into the fabric of the house was the fear that all of this would end.

The wooden farmhouse was enclosed by a fence of woven branches, both utilitarian and decorative. Within the fence lay our vegetable garden, the hen and duck pen and our orchard. Across from the house stood our barn, another wooden, thatched building housing our hay and grain, farm tools and tractor. During the freezing winter months the barn also provided shelter for our animals: cows, horses and pigs. Firewood was stacked and covered against an end wall.

Beyond the barn, a windbreak of poplars stood like sentinels, guarding our fifty-acre farm. The farm, situated on the edge of the village, was almost self-sufficient.

The village was mainly self-governing, living our lives as we had done for hundreds of years. Similar homes to ours stood side by side, each inside their own woven-wooden fences, each with their own small vegetable plots, orchards, and gardens. At the centre of the village stood the little wooden church with its icons and its bell that tolled to call the people to worship and prayer.

We were kulaks. The definition of a kulak originally referred to land- owners and farmers. Because we owned land, we were considered wealthy. The definition of wealth was a relative thing. In a poor village, it could mean the difference between owning two pigs instead of one. A farm could consist of fifty acres or just one or two acres.

The definition of kulak also became a relative term. Originally referring to the wealthy landowners, it came to mean anyone who owned land, however big or small the plot of land was.

As the oppression of Stalin widened, so too did the definition of kulak. It came to mean anyone who was disliked by the rest of the village or had made enemies amongst the rulers of the local community or village. Ultimately, it came to mean anyone who was Ukrainian. Once named a kulak, you were considered a traitor, an enemy and no longer a citizen. You lost property rights, legal standing, your home, your place of work and your possessions.

When change came in 1929, it came rapidly. The changes came from every direction. Stalin was thorough. He recruited



25,000 working class, urban activists to help carry out the collectivisation. They were culturally, linguistically, and ethnically alien to the Ukraine. The resultant clashes resulted in anger and cruelty. It brought about radical and instant change. Loose organisation of the Ukrainian villages gave way to tight control. Just recovering from the shortages of the summer, these newcomers reminded my parents of 1919 when soldiers had come and taken our grain.

Under the guise of efficiency, collective farms, owned jointly by the commune or state were to replace all private farms. Most of these collectives would require their members to give up their private property, livestock, and farm implements.

As Stalin put his plan into action, he engaged many different groups with the responsibility for the implementation of collectivisation. These groups included local communist parties, Komsomol, (the communist youth organisation), Young Pioneers, (communist children's organisation), committees of poor peasants, Central Control Commission, Workers, and Peasants Inspectorate, Kolkhoz-Izentr (Collective Farm Centre), trade unions, secret police and other state officials including teachers.

Poor villagers were set against wealthier ones. Many families who had worked for the kulaks and hated them couldn't wait to get rid of them.

The need for Russians to prove their loyalty to Stalin gave no incentive to be kind. Many who joined the collectivisation brigades did so out of fear. Komsomol members received direct orders to participate. They had no option but to join and obey orders.

Eventually, all these people were told to move from limiting kulaks to the extermination of the kulaks as a class. For the kulaks, there was nowhere to hide. Some kulaks hid in the forests, but they were hunted out and dealt harshly with, even to the point of death.