
[Bread Is Life](#)

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The blue-grey slate roof, solid red brick walls and chimney pot of our Victorian terraced house cast its patient gaze over my childhood and youth for sixteen years. It was fixed in its place amongst a long row of identical two up, two down workers houses stretching out of sight around the bend in Willowbrook road. In 1957 it was the place of my birth; my home, my happy, sad, turbulent and tragic home. After the death of my father in 2005 this house in which he had spent almost forty years of his life was packed, cleared and made ready for sale to the highest bidder; just like that. The times and memories of our lives in this place were not for sale. They stay with me, they always will.

A couple of years after the sale went through I had reason to go back to my home town on business; after finishing work and looking up some old fiends I found myself sitting in the car opposite my old house, gazing at the familiar but immutable front door and windows. The paint had changed, but the shoulders of our house were as solid and broad as ever. Random scenes from our past began to roll before my vision: Mum pushing a pram down the entry way with her hungry kids tagging along noisily behind glad to be home, and looking for food. The many times she returned from town exhausted with her shopping bags full to bursting for a family of six, she did this well into her fifties, often pleading with her sons for help. The day she left us crying, carrying her small suitcase in a flight for freedom after a violent blazing row with my Dad. Returning days later with nowhere else to go. I saw my father coming home sore and soaked with sweat from the building site. Taking us to the park, gardening, painting, reading the paper, getting angry, very angry with us all, beating us all, smiling as we made fun of his accent, thinking about his dream of buying a bigger and better house with his sons when they got jobs and started earning. My brothers with their toy's, football's, bicycle's, school uniform's, motorbike's and car's coming to and fro. My sister with a pair of scissors pointed at my fathers gut. Nothing had physically changed, yet everything else had.

My father was the strong heart of our family but a stranger to me; I was only to understand a little of him, and the true reasons he was as he was, much later in life; even then the knowledge only came slowly after I exchanged the uncomprehending bitterness and anger of youth for the reflection and reason of adulthood. In the last few years of his life I was lucky enough to talk to him about his hopes and dreams as a young man, then as a refugee, then as a proud father of babes in arms; the few dreams he would let me see and share. As we talked we became friends, we became father and son.

The rain fell on the pavement outside and I rolled up the window against it but nothing could stop the rain in my heart.

Father was born in 1921 in a tiny village outside Vinnitsa in the western Ukraine about two hundred kilometres from Kiev. He came to Britain as refugee after the second world war and the Russians. It is with regret I only spoke to him a few times about how our family came into being and the horrors he withstood to make a new life in a foreign land. Of his

childhood I know next to nothing but some fragments of his memory I can record. Long before the outbreak of the second world war the savage turmoil of the soviet communists would descend on the Ukraine without mercy.

In 1929 Stalin began forced collectivisation; peasants and farmers across the Soviet Union, of which the Ukraine was a part, were ordered to give their land, livestock and labour to the collective farms. Stalin's theory predicted it would increase food and grain available for the growing urban population, this would in turn support a program of rapid industrialisation. Stalin did this to shore up the failing policies of a corrupt and brutal communist regime in power since the October revolution of 1918. During those few years of power it had acquired a personality so venal any vestige of humanity it once possessed was lost. In the fantasy world of the communist politburo, led by the madness of Stalin, their decree was enough make it work; but it didn't.

They reckoned without human nature and the will to resist.

Soviet grain production decreased rapidly, the peasants and farmers no longer had the incentive to work, it became clear their policy was failing miserably. The Ukraine was the breadbasket of the Soviet Union, its rich black soil had produced food in abundance for thousands of years so "resistance" to collectivisation was at its highest there. The Ukrainian resistors would have to be eliminated.

Stalin and the soviets started a system of requisition enforced by seizure. It was introduced against "hoarders", who in the depraved minds of the regime were deliberately withholding grain from the state to drive up prices and derail their infallible plans. Seizures were resisted; sometimes violently. The soviets identified a class of private individuals they could blame, then villify, and in the end murder. The "Kulaks", the independent farmers and anyone who owned the means of production however small. My grandfather and grandmother were declared Kulak along with my father, a twelve year old child in 1932.

Dad spoke of a time when the communists forbade, on pain of death, the collection of seeds in the field that had fallen during harvest. One hundred and twenty five thousand human beings were executed for this 'crime' alone. "Resistance" meant death, or if you were lucky, deportation to a Siberian labour camp. In the words of Stalin "we have gone over to a policy of liquidating the kulaks as a class. " The scale and meaning of the monsters words were revealed terribly in the years that followed. The will to resist collectivisation would be crushed by famine.

In a deliberate act of genocide, a holocaust of starvation was unleashed, not in gas chambers, but on the farms and homes and in the stomachs of the 'resistors'. Men, women and children were denied the right to feed themselves, grain was seized not to fulfill quotas but to extinguish life, genocide by madmans decree. Depending on which account you read the number of deaths attributable to this mass murder vary between 4 and 10 million in the Ukraine alone. The figure of ten million comes indirectly from the lips of Stalin himself. He was speaking to Churchill at Yalta in 1945 and said 10 million had died to set up the collectives. Grandfather and grandmother risked death each day for many years for handfuls of forbidden grain. They and my father survived the holocaust. Millions of Ukrainians died, exterminated. Stalin's collectives had been established.

In the western world of plenty, my fathers attitude to food and his single minded will to put food on the table and make sure we ate every scrap caused rebellion in our house. It is only now I get just a glimmer of what he and his fallen comrades went through so that I might eat my fill in freedom and that his duty to us was done. "Bread is life" father used to say, looking at the crusts we had left behind on the plate. What thoughts and horrors lay behind the expression on his face I can know of just a few.

Father, if you are listening "Bread is life" and I love you.

I turned the key in the ignition, glanced at our old home once more, then drove along our street through the pouring rain, perhaps for the last time.

Max Crean (C) November 2009

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