

V2V XVIII

“Because We Are Ukrainians”

Luda Anastazievsky, MN Ukrainian American Advocacy Committee Chair, Ukrainian American Community Center’s board member

Contributions from: David Feinberg, the founder and director of the Voice to Vision project, Beth Andrews, Sima Shahriar, Peter Truran, Ben Mchie, Kimchi Hoang, Luis Ramos-Garcia, Kirk Allison, Travis Balitz, Kyle Balitz, Meyer Weinshel, and Rochelle Hammer.

2023, 33 x 33 ½”, acrylic paint and collage on hardboard

The mixed media art “Because We Are Ukrainians” reflects Luda’s perception of the personal and collective trauma of two genocides her family members and Ukrainian society experienced - ninety years ago, in 1932-33, during the Holodomor (extermination by hunger) and in 2022-23 after the renewed Russian aggression.

At the same time this artwork is also a result of the collective exchange of ideas and sharing of stories - all part of the Voice to Vision process where the contributors experience illuminating ‘aha’ moments which culminate in finding the unexpected significance. The group talks led to an intuitive creation of visual and affective connections between the historic genocide and the modern one, contextualizing and illuminating present day events.

In the center of the artwork, the two identical photos of an emaciated starving young girl from 1933 are placed. While the first, slightly bigger image, underscores the girl's solitude and sadness of dying in isolation in the past, in the second image, the child with the ruins of the destroyed apartment building in the background, is witnessing the present day apocalypse. The girl is a symbol of retraumatization of the Ukrainian nation. Old wounds are superimposed on new ones - both by the same authoritarian regime.

The destroyed apartment buildings are an important part of this mixed media work. They serve as a reminder of the grim and heartbreaking reality that follows and stems from Russia’s genocidal actions in present day Ukraine.

Since the beginning of the full-scale invasion in February 2022, the Russian regime has systematically perpetrated crimes designed to terrorize, devastate, and eliminate the Ukrainian people. Russia’s atrocities include indiscriminate attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure including Luda’s native Mariupol, (90 percent of which was destroyed with tens of thousands of people killed), torture and extrajudicial executions of civilians and military personnel, forced deportation of Ukrainian citizens to Russia. 1.2 million Ukrainians - including approximately 260,000 children - were forcibly deported from their homeland, including Luda’s relatives. Russia’s crimes against Ukrainians have the gravest impact on Ukraine’s most vulnerable populations, especially children and the elderly.

Wheat, the symbol of life, prosperity and spiritual wealth, is another element in this art piece. It has been associated with Ukraine, often called the ‘breadbasket of Europe.’ During the Ukrainian

Holodomor-Famine of 1932-33, however, it became a weapon of genocide orchestrated to destroy the very fabric of the Ukrainian nation with centuries long farming traditions.

In the summer of 2022, Russian occupiers weaponized the wheat again. They burned Ukrainian fields of wheat and fired at cars with civilians, who went to get some food to survive. The Russian government prevented Ukrainian ships (with wheat for export) from leaving the ports to bring the food to the starving people in Africa and Asia. The history has repeated itself warped by new realities.

In the 1930s, Stalin's goal was to industrialize the Ukrainian farmlands in order to subsidize the construction of communism. Ukrainians resisted the collectivization of their property. To break up their independent spirit, the Soviet authorities confiscated all foodstuffs, including the seed grain, by force. Soldiers cordoned off the villages making the escape and survival impossible.

During the Holodomor, millions of Ukrainians were deliberately starved to death by Stalin's regime and were dying at a rate of 28,000 people per day in June of 1933. Yet, this heinous crime was unknown to the world. This crime was covered up and denied by the Soviet Government. It is still denied and unrecognized by its successor state: the Russian Federation. Raphael Lemkin, a Polish Jew and an expert in international criminal law who coined and promoted the term "genocide," identified the Holodomor as "the classic example of Soviet genocide."

Luda's grandparents were Holodomor survivors but, like most Ukrainians, she didn't know that growing up in the former Soviet Union. The crime of the genocidal famine was kept secret until shortly before Ukraine won its independence in 1991. Years later, while already living in Minnesota, Luda learned that her family survived thanks to the fish from the Azov Sea. For decades the Soviet authorities enforced strict orders throughout the country prohibiting the use of the word 'famine' in public state documents including textbooks as well as medical and statistical records. As a result, much of the collective memory of the horrific tragedy that took place in the 1932-33 was lost. Generations of Ukrainians had to live with suppressed unspeakable trauma without a chance to process it.

Every third Thursday of November, Ukrainians commemorate the victims of the Holodomor genocide by placing a candle in the window of house or apartment. Luda inserted the candles in the image of the destroyed apartment building to both memorialize the innocent victims of the past and honor the memory of the present.

In her artwork, Luda incorporated an image of a pysanka, an Easter egg hand painted in a wax resist method. Traditionally, Ukrainian Easter eggs symbolize hope and renewal. Dating back to pre-Christian times, they are an element of continuity within Ukrainian folk culture. There is a belief among Ukrainians that as long as pysanky are being made, the world will exist and with it will exist the Ukrainians. The broken shards of a pysanka at the bottom of the canvas symbolize the destruction of the Ukrainian nation and the atomization of society.

As a final touch, Luda added the cranes rising from the darkness and destruction and soaring toward the light. On the one hand, these birds symbolize the mourning of the dead, but on the other, they represent the resilience and rebirth of the indomitable Ukrainian nation. Ukrainian people's drive and determination will overcome challenges; they will succeed, even when the odds are against them.

During our Voice to Vision meetings, David Feinberg, the project's founder and director, observed that this was the first time the group was working on a project related to the genocide and mass atrocities as they happen in real time. The historic genocide, the Holodomor, and the current genocide fueled by the Russia's colonial ambitions are less than 100 years apart, and both are inflicted by totalitarian political regimes. Three generations in Luda's family were affected by this repeated trauma. Yet, they survived, believing that the lessons of the past taught them not only to mourn Ukraine, but to fight back and win.

The Voice to Vision project generates deep, spiritual bonds between participants created by sharing, experiencing, and reliving the traumatic events together. To Luda this shared experience felt therapeutic promoting emotional healing. She hopes that by viewing her art and listening to her story, people will come to understand that evil is very real, that it's caused by real people, and unless we all act to stop it, that evil can spread and infect societies across our interconnected world. Luda believes that when Ukraine wins, the good wins, and the democracy wins for justice to be restored and shared with all of humanity.