

Honouring the victims: Ukrainian community marks 75th anniversary of deadly famine

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Members of Sudbury's Ukrainian community joined millions around the world Saturday to mark the 75th anniversary of a famine that wiped out an estimated 10 million people in their former country.

What happened in the Ukraine in 1932 and 1933 came out of "Soviet policy to crush the nationalist aspirations of the Ukrainian people," said Steven Ostafichuk, president of the Oshawa branch of the League of Ukrainians and guest speaker at Saturday's ceremony, held at Tom Davies Square.

Last spring, the Canadian government declared that what happened in the Ukraine in 1932 and 1933 was an act of genocide by the Stalinist government of the time and passed an act of Parliament recognizing the fourth Saturday in November as Ukrainian Holodomor-Genocide Remembrance Day.

Ostafichuk has a personal connection to the famine, although he did not realize it until recently, he said.

Raised in a home where both parents were medical professionals, he had a nanny or caregiver.

It was only after the caregiver died and his family went through her effects that it was discovered she had lost both her children and her husband in the famine.

In the fall of 1932, Russian authorities confiscated grain, livestock and other food in villages across the Soviet Union, after peasants failed to meet grain quotas that exceeded crop yields.

The Soviet Union exported the grain to raise funds to build factories and arm its military.

Residents were prohibited from leaving their homes.

The number of people who starved to death has been put as high as 10 million.

Many of those who survived the famine and their descendants emigrated to Canada.

Up until only two decades ago, the Russian government denied there was a famine.

But now the archives are being opened and the accounts of survivors are being verified by the documentation that is being found.

That documentation, said Ostafichuk, is being compiled by a team of volunteers that is making it available to universities around the world. Saturday, Ostafichuk presented the collected works to the Sudbury group for presentation to Laurentian University.

A travelling exhibit, made from archival material, historical items and accounts of survivors, also was on display during Saturday's ceremony.

Ostafichuk hopes that, through educating people about what happened in Ukraine, he can show what happens in any genocide and why they should be avoided, he told his audience.

"Humans are the most inhumane beasts on the planet. It doesn't seem that a year goes by that you don't hear of some Holocaust, some massacre, some genocide," Ostafichuk said. "This political atrocity that happened to our people. It was a political and economic genocide designed to break the backs and spirits of an emerging country and culture.

"That's what makes it genocide. We see this happening time and time again. Anything we can do to teach future generations as to what genocide is all about, oppression is all about, subjugation is all about, gives us an opportunity to evolve humans into a better class of people," he added.