

Pulling Together – My Community Gains Back Food Security

I remember chopping cabbage, beets, and potatoes for borsch – a beloved national dish – when my mom called me over to watch local TV. It was spring 2014, and the Kremenchuk News was featuring our dear family friend Uncle Sasha for his fearlessness on the battlefield. At first, we thought this was just showcasing local military volunteers, but then the line: “Condolences to family and friends” appeared. He died while making dinner for soldiers in Donbas. Although my mother and I were heartbroken at the news, we shared a dinner consisting of Uncle Sasha’s favorite dishes with no thought about where our next meal was coming from. Most Kremenchuk citizens were blessed with food security.

Uncle Sasha not only taught me cooking; he instilled in me a love for our national food culture. Almost every dinner for Kremenchuk citizens consisted of hot soup, a main entrée, and salad – three dishes made out of fresh ingredients; pre-packaged or canned are used primarily in winter. However, the full-scale Russian invasion of February 2022 made it almost impossible to cook even borsch. Due to the occupation and laying of land mines, 30% of our most fertile soil was not sown with vegetables. Russians destroyed or stole 2.8 million tons of grain and 1.2 million tons of sunflower crops. The biggest European poultry farm lost more than 4 million chickens due to starvation. The impossibility of transporting provisions to my centrally-located town and the increase of almost twice the population due to the displacement of internal refugees caused severe food shortages in every supermarket.

I used to be perplexed as to why people should spend hours growing crops when they could simply buy them in a grocery store. The invasion changed my mind: we sustained our nutrition by cultivating our small plot of land and harvesting produce. The hardest time frame to cope with was February-March, when working on the land was impossible. Ukrainian grandparents’ habit of making preserves of canned vegetables, pickles, and jams, helped everyone survive the coldest period. Meat, usually the most important ingredient, was still problematic to find. Once, a hunter donated a wild boar, and the restaurant where I volunteered turned this into many delicious meals for military personnel.

Native Kremenchuk citizens cut their own subsistence to help internally displaced fellow Ukrainians. Eateries distributed free dinners for internal refugees and military members. And despite internal difficulties and missile attacks on ports like Odesa, Ukraine is still exporting grain to African and Asian countries whose people would otherwise suffer from food insecurity. The “Grain from Ukraine” initiative started in August 2022 by sending 26,000 tons of corn to Lebanon and continues in April 2023 with 30,000 tons of wheat to Yemen.

The full-scale war brought devastation to my community, but we remain brave and inventive owing to inspirational people like Uncle Sasha. It is my fervent wish that, working together to achieve food security in all our communities, we will reinstate Ukraine as a breadbasket again