

# Sukhomlinsky News



## Sukhomlinsky the person

*This issue is devoted to the final instalment of Simon Soloveichik's 1971 article about Sukhomlinsky. This final section is mainly biographical. It gives some insight into Sukhomlinsky's character, and the terrible tragedy he suffered during the war.*

Next month I will return to a more varied format, including some of Sukhomlinsky's little tales for children. I also hope to have news regarding the publication of my new translation of *My heart I Give to Children*.

Best wishes,

Alan Cockerill

## Tell people about Sukhomlinsky

*The following is the final instalment of an article by journalist Simon Soloveichik, published in 1971.*

Vasily Aleksandrovich Sukhomlinsky was born in 1918 not far from Pavlysh, in the family of a farm worker, the first chairman of the collective farm. There were four children and they all became teachers. Vasily Aleksandrovich worked as a teacher from the age of seventeen, completing a course at the Poltava Pedagogical Institute by correspondence. Then came the war, serving on the front, serious wounds and hospital. At the age of twenty-four Sukhomlinsky was appointed principal of a school in Uva, in Udmurtia, where he was convalescing from his wounds. At twenty-six, when his native district of Onufriivka was liberated from German occupation, he was put in charge of the district office of education there. At twenty-nine years of age he was appointed principal of Pavlysh Secondary School, where he served until his death just short of his fifty-second birthday...

Pedagogy keeps suffering terrible losses. Ushinsky died aged forty-seven, Makarenko aged fifty-one. But an educator is not a poet. He cannot express his wisdom at a young age. He needs decades to accumulate life experience and arrive at pedagogical convictions. Sukhomlinsky needed those decades.

In his youth he wrote (and even published) poetry. In his books he even refers to the fact that he wrote novellas. Like Makarenko, for a certain period of his life he wavered, choosing his path in life. Nothing in life came to him easily. Many years passed before he accumulated his library of 18,000 books, and the knowledge that came with those books. He had many friends, who staunchly supported his work and his quest, but a man of such boldness could not help attracting opponents. Sukhomlinsky never wrote about the battles he had to fight. His books were criticised for the lack of conflict in them, and indeed it does seem as if everything he did went smoothly, without any obstacles. But you need to understand the exceptional quality of this man: he never complained to anybody about anything and was physically incapable of writing about his difficulties. If his manuscript was not accepted for publication he stored it away and began a new work. He was happy and laughed like a child. Nobody ever saw him gloomy or in a bad mood, and none of his colleagues new of the tragedy that he carried with him all his life.

Every person has a visible life and an invisible life, a spiritual life that is manifested in their creativity, their character and their battles. Sukhomlinsky also had another life, hidden in the depths of his soul, and so well hidden from the world that it is amazing that he was able to hold himself together.

It is difficult to write about this. I will cite a few pages (abridged) from his unpublished work 'Letters to my Son'. They relate to the difficult days when *The Teacher's Newspaper* published an article entitled 'We need a campaign, and not a sermon', in which Sukhomlinsky was accused of introducing into educational thought 'a hazy concept called "humaneness"'. This article was responded to appropriately by the journal *National Education*, and the polemic gradually settled down...

'I was in a serious condition [in hospital] when I was brought several newspapers, including the issue of *The Teacher's Newspaper* containing that memorable article. Having read it from beginning to end I tried to take myself in hand, to tell myself that nothing had happened, but I did not have the strength of will.

... I cannot agree that a child must be loved circumspectly, that there is a danger in humaneness, sensitivity, affection and warmth... I am a teacher, and educator of children, I continue to live in my pupils. I love them unconditionally and without circumspection. I am convinced that it is only through humaneness, affection and kindness—yes, simple human kindness—that one can educate a genuine human being... A third of a century working in schools has convinced me that a normal education, an absolutely normal education—perhaps for now an ideal—is an education without punishment, without tirades or threats, without raising your voice. I want to clarify this, in order to avoid misunderstanding: not simply education without punishment, but education without the need for punishment. I firmly believe that a time will come when people will not know what it is to hit another person or to insult them. I educate children in accord with my pedagogical faith...

I began my educational work in 1935. In 1940 I was married. A year later, in the spring of 1941, my wife Vera Petrovna graduated from teachers' college. We were planning to work in the same school. We were young and full of hope for the future.

The war shattered out hopes. As soon as it started I went to the front. No-one at that time could have suspected that within six weeks the fascists would reach the banks of the Dnieper. I thought I would soon return to celebrate victory. As we parted we dreamt of the son or

daughter we were to have. But things turned out very differently. The village on the Dnieper, where Vera was staying with her parents, was taken by fascists. My wife and two of her friends were distributing leaflets... A traitor informed on them. Vera and her two friends were arrested by the Gestapo...

Vera gave birth to our son while being detained and tortured. Hypocritically promising to spare her life, the fascists committed a terrible crime. Twenty-five years later my heart still burns when I for an instant imagine what happened then. A fascist officer took our son, only a few days old, to my wife and said, 'If you do not give us the names of the leaders of your organisation we will kill your child.' And they killed him.

...Then they hung Vera. That happened at the very time when I was seriously wounded, fighting on the frontline. I was shot through the chest. Several fragments of metal are still sitting in my lungs.

Now, my son, I have told you my secret. Your mother has known it since we first met. She asked me to tell you about it once you had become an adult.

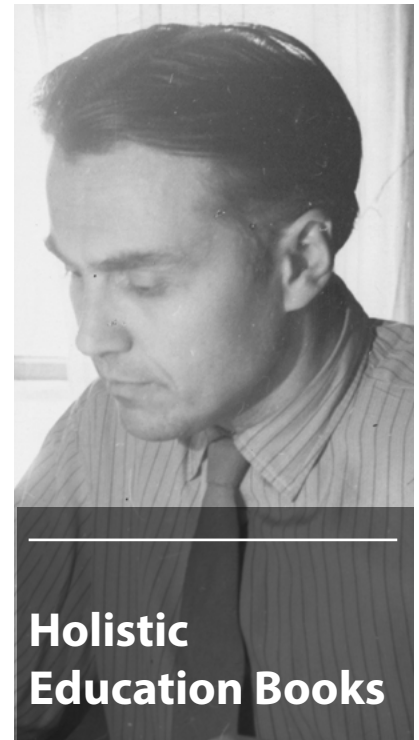
... I returned to work in a school. Work, work and more work; in it I sought to forget my grief. All day I was with children. But at night I woke at two or three and could not get back to sleep... Even now I wait every morning for the children: with them I find happiness. I am often asked how I have managed to write so much. Yes, it probably is a lot: 320 scholarly works, including 33 books. I am inspired by two feelings: love and hate. Love for children, and hatred for fascism...

In my heart an eternal rage burns, and at the same time I want to embrace and show affection to all the children in our country. I want them all to be spared grief and suffering... Every day, every hour, I awaken humaneness in children's hearts—the subtle capacity to feel the complex movements of another person's heart and soul.

... Nobody can force me to renounce the conviction that the most important subject in Soviet schools must be the study of human nature.

...Now I have given you a full account of myself, my son.

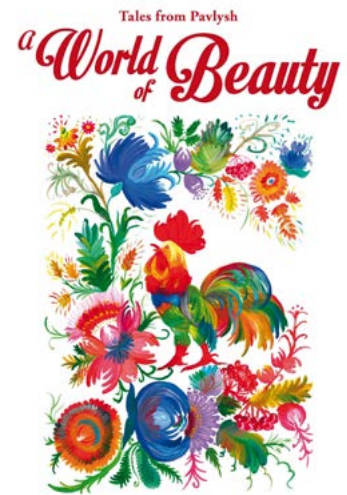
Your father, VA Sukhomlinsky  
 Hero of Socialist Labour  
 Honoured School Teacher, Ukraine  
 Corresponding member of the  
 USSR Academy of Pedagogical  
 Sciences



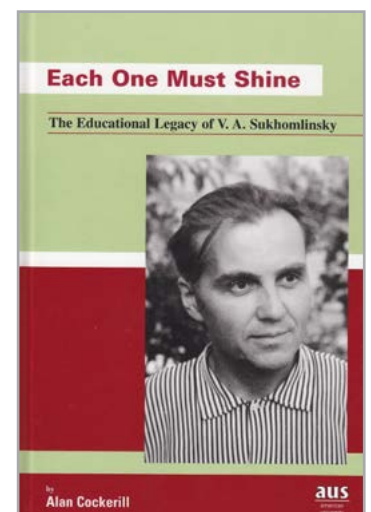
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Why did Vasily Aleksandrovich put his name and titles after the words 'your father'? He never did that... He wanted to emphasise that everything written here is not just literature; it is the truth. Even now, after Sukhomlinsky's death, it would have been difficult to publish these pages, had they not been already included in a work intended for publication.

I beg the readers' forgiveness. I have omitted from this letter descriptions of the horrific torture to which the mother and child were subjected. ... Sukhomlinsky was 25 years old when he learnt of the death of Vera Poshva, his beloved. They say she was the most beautiful girl in the district, half Ukrainian and half gypsy. For more than 25 years his soul was tormented by a vision that he could not forget.

...What did this man go through? What did he see in every child that he embraced? What guilt did this blameless man suffer? I was told that after the war he nearly suffered a break-down, and even spent time in hospital. Then he gathered all his courage and controlled the feelings in his heart. He poured an ocean of love for children into this world, raised a son and daughter, raised a thousand children, but could not silence the pain he had suffered.

Great educators appear when children most need them. Makarenko's pedagogy saved millions of orphans after the civil war. Sukhomlinsky's pedagogical ideas took shape in response to the Second World War, when millions of children lost their fathers, and experienced trauma too

great for a child's psyche to bear. In Sukhomlinsky's personal tragedy, and the tragedies of so many families, we find the source of his special relationship with children. Gorky wrote of Makarenko that he was consumed 'with a fire of practical love for children'. These words apply equally to Sukhomlinsky.

He was critically ill for many years, but nobody heard a word of complaint from him. Sometimes, during a conversation, he would suddenly turn pale, stand, and stagger to the door of his office. 'What's the matter?' people would ask in fear. 'Not a word. Not a word!' And he would leave the room. Then he would return and continue the conversation. He tried to overcome everything, the pain and the grief, and not to give way to the burden of suffering or to the burden of fame, and simply to work. Every day for decades Vasily Sukhomlinsky rose at four in the morning, crossed the corridor into his office, and sat down to work until eight, when he left his office to greet the children. Four hours a day for decades. He wrote a great deal. He wrote almost without corrections, not thinking of the many editions his works would go through. He was not writing books; he was pouring out his soul, patiently building the framework of his pedagogy. Do not look for stylistic niceties in his work. Pay no attention to the repetition, the long sentences or the preponderance of examples. Listen to his heart and learn from his wisdom. He did not need to economise with his material or his ideas; he sowed his seeds generously, wherever they

might fall. He hastened, knowing that his days were numbered.

Doctors warned him that he would die, and tried to convince him to take a year off to recuperate. He would not leave the school and his work.

His final operation lasted only fifteen minutes. Doctors were horrified at his condition and realised there was nothing they could do to help him. He was mortally wounded during the war, but his strength of spirit allowed him to live for another thirty years, and to live as fully as any living man can. He died on 2 September, 1970, at the very beginning of the school year, but he will live for many more years, not only in people's memories, but as if he were still living and working today. It will take many years to publish all the books that were found among his manuscripts after he died. They will appear, year after year, as if he were still alive, once again prolonging his life...

He knew that he was condemned, but consciously chose death, preferring it to life without school.

In October 1968 he sent a letter to the director of the Radianska Shkola publishing house, which began with the words: 'In connection with an incurable disease, and the inevitable cessation in the near future of my scholarly and educational work, I ask the Radianska Shkola publishing house to accept the gift of all my published works... Apart from that, after the cessation of my scholarly and educational work I ask you to accept the gift of all my completed manuscripts that are ready for publication...'



## Tell people about Sukhomlinsky (cont.)

There follows a list of eighteen manuscripts containing five and a half thousand typed pages, 220 author's sheets [a unit of 40,000 ens]. But that does not include all his works. It will take a long time to sort through them all.

The letter ends: 'Until the cessation of my scholarly and educational work I request that you consider this letter confidential. Nobody must know of it other than you. That is very important.

Yours sincerely, V. Sukhomlinsky.

18 October, 1968. Pavlysh.

Nobody must know... Nobody in the school, not one person, knew that Vasily Aleksandrovich was terminally ill. 'You should know not only how to live rightly, but also how to die like a human being.' Those are his words. 'Cessation of activity', that is how such people refer to death.

Tell people about Sukhomlinsky!

Tell people about Sukhomlinsky. He was buried by the whole school, the whole village, and a huge number of other people who travelled to his funeral. The teachers had to decide whether to invite the little children whom Sukhomlinsky had prepared for school during all of the previous year. Would that be too traumatic for them? But he had written: 'When a child's heart encounters the death of someone they love, the experience of loss awakens not only a sense of joy in living and a thirst for life, but also a new vision of the world. A person discovers with amazement the true value of living, feeling and seeing, and savours the joy of existence and awareness. Only someone who has realised in their soul what it means to lose someone, can see in their own behaviour their relationship to others.'

They brought the children to the clubhouse.

One boy said, 'That is not our teacher... Our teacher always walked or sat, and that one is lying down... Our teacher promised he would take us out in a boat...'

I talked with these children who were now in grade one. That is how they remembered 'our teacher'. They remembered someone who took them into the forest, who lit campfires with them, who showed them how to read letters, who made up a story with them about a starling, and who promised to take them out in a boat...

So that the little ones would not be trampled by the crowd, they were surrounded by a ring of final year students and placed at the head of the procession. The route from the clubhouse to the cemetery was covered with dahlias and asters. The little boys and girls walked over the flowers, while their teacher followed behind.

The cemetery is not far from the school, only two minutes' walk.

Sukhomlinsky did not leave his school, and now he will never leave it.

The street on which the school stands is named after Sukhomlinsky, as is the school itself.

I am writing these lines late at night in Pavlysh, in the most unpretentious school principal's office I have ever seen. Here, every day, he greeted the dawn. Here he wrote, 'It is possible to build a life without grief and suffering... It is possible to create amazing human happiness.'

An old, inexpensive bookshelf, a divan covered in papers (as it always was), a shabby yellow chair, which does not seem to fit in the room and is in the way. The Ukrainian government has decided there will be a Sukhomlinsky museum here. (At the nearest major train station, in Kremenchuk, there is a Makarenko museum. The geography of history can be strange.) This will be a museum. This bookshelf, desk and table, the simplest of objects, are taking on historical significance before my eyes. Tomorrow this will be a museum bookshelf and a museum desk, and this makes me feel slightly uneasy. It is not every day you see everyday life becoming a part of history...

The dawn is breaking.

Tell people about Sukhomlinsky, to the best of your ability! If we only tell people about Sukhomlinsky, about his school and his ideas, they are sure to find a way to people's hearts.

