

Sukhomlynsky News



Tell People about Sukhomlynsky

article by **Simon Soloveichik**

There are common expressions: 'well known', 'widely known', 'known to everyone'. I will be up front about the aim of this article, however audacious it may seem. Its aim is that the educator Sukhomlynsky, whose name is widely known in our country, should become known to everyone. Of course, a journal article cannot fulfil such an aim. That is why I am urging you, the reader, to tell people about Sukhomlynsky.

A year and a half ago, when Vasyl Oleksandrovysh was still alive, I wrote in Komsomolskaya Pravda that one day all educational textbooks would mention Sukhomlynsky, and that the name of Pavlysh, the Ukrainian village where he taught, would be known to every educated person. Many accused me of exaggeration, including educators. At one meeting I had to convince people that my article about Sukhomlynsky was not just nonsense (that is what someone said: 'stuff and nonsense'). Alas! For a long time it seemed to all of us that Sukhomlynsky was just a good teacher, like many others. We did not immediately understand his significance, and that is natural. There is nothing shameful in that fact for us or for Sukhomlynsky. This is an eternal human drama. We are not able to recognise greatness, when it is too close to home. We are reluctant to crane our necks to see beyond the clouds, and we cannot see clearly enough to discern what is at such heights...

Not long ago I received a letter from a woman in Khabarovsk, whom I have never met, and who asked me not to reveal her name due to the personal nature of the letter's contents:

continued overleaf



Tell people about Sukhomlynsky

Dear reader,

I hope you are well.

This month's newsletter contains an article by education journalist Simon Soloveichik written not long after Sukhomlynsky died in 1970.

The article appeared in issues 5–8 of this newsletter back in 2015 and 2016. If you are interested in seeing the illustrations in those issues, they can be downloaded from the newsletter webpage:

<https://theholisticeducator.net/sukhomlynsky/newsletter/>

The article will be continued in next month's newsletter.

Best wishes,

Alan Cockerill



Tell People about Sukhomlynsky (continued)

'Sukhomlynsky's life and his creative work are a national treasure that we need to preserve as something precious. When will another Sukhomlynsky appear? In 50-100 years? And perhaps not even then.

I could not find his book *My Heart I Give to Children in the Far East*, though we wrote to Kiev, Kharkov and Odessa, through personal contacts and through official channels. The book was not available. In the middle of October (1969), I found a copy of Sukhomlynsky's book Pavlysh Secondary School. I read it, and I had not experienced such a strong impression from a book since I first read Tolstoy's philosophical works. Believe it or not, I could not sleep. How can it be, I thought, that such a man exists, and he is not promoted? The general public does not know about him. I discussed it with my husband, and we decided that, at least in our own family, we would apply Sukhomlynsky's advice in our daily lives...

[The writer of the letter goes on to describe how they applied Sukhomlynsky's advice, and how it helped their sons, who were in years 9 and 10 at school.]

...Every day that year I considered writing a letter to Vasyl Oleksandrovysh, expressing my gratitude. After all, he practically saved my children at a time when things seemed hopeless. But I could not muster the courage...

And now... I consider myself so ungrateful... It turns out you should never put anything off...!

Well, we have an even greater responsibility now. Like that wonderful woman from Khabarovsk, we must tell people about Sukhomlynsky, realising that his work is a national treasure.

Tell people about Sukhomlynsky. Tell them about his school. Tell them that the school in Pavlysh, in its external appearance, is like any other country school, unless it is perhaps a little poorer. Most collective farms will extend a little financial assistance to local schools, but the school in Pavlysh survives on a normal budget allocation.

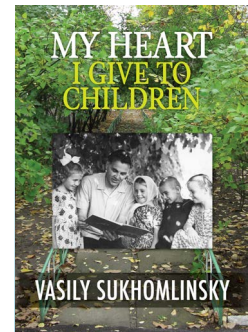
Sukhomlynsky was a corresponding member of the Academy of Pedagogical Sciences, a decorated teacher, a Hero of Socialist Labour. Everyone understands that it would not have been difficult for him to obtain some special privileges for his school. But on principle he would not take any more than he was entitled to. They added an extra wing to the old pre-revolutionary school and used the annual maintenance budget to build a small module each year, capable of housing one or two classes. In this way they managed to ensure that all the children could attend school in a single shift, and not in three shifts, as it was when Sukhomlynsky first took on management of the school in 1947. And the school also has a greenhouse, a rabbit farm, an apiary, a meteorological station, four workshops, an orchard, a vineyard and a dovecote... Sukhomlynsky only did what it is possible to do in any school, no matter how far from the city and how impoverished it is. When you are telling people about Sukhomlynsky, and you are greeted with the sceptical response, "But of course, he was a Hero of Socialist Labour. He had access to anything he wanted...", do not forget to mention that although he may have had access to special treatment, he did not take advantage of it.

Externally, the school, its teachers, and its children, appear no different to any other school, teachers or children. When guests visit lessons (and there is a constant stream of guests at Pavlysh), if they are teachers, they leave puzzled: "I don't understand. The same lesson, the same plan..."

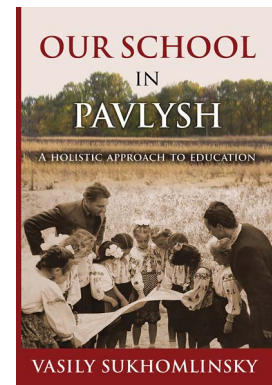
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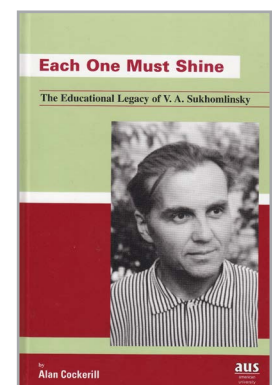
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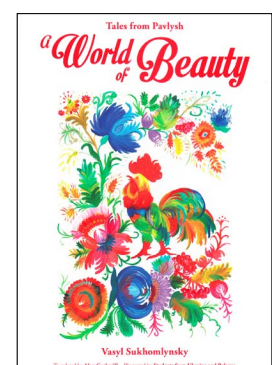
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We give lessons like that... But why do the children understand the subject better and study more willingly?"

The same lessons, the same programs, no innovative methods, nothing that could be promoted as 'Sukhomlynsky's experience', and then forcefully implemented in all schools, with reprimands for failing to implement it.

...In this school everything is 'the same', except...

Except that, after the last bell, the classrooms and corridors fall silent. Not a single student or teacher is allowed to stay five minutes in the school buildings. Go home! Rest! Read books! Work in the orchard! Prepare for the clubs and extra-curricular activities! Supplementary lessons? There are none. They have been reduced to non-compulsory consultations before lessons. Staff meetings? No more than once per week. A school thrives on the free time available to teachers and students. That is one of Sukhomlynsky's ideas that provided access to all his other discoveries. For teachers to teach well and for children to study well, they both need as much free time as possible. Students' success depends not on spending four or five hours a day studying, but on their general level of development, how much they read, how much time they have for their favourite subjects. Less time spent on lessons, and more on study that is motivated. Sukhomlynsky never tired of persuading his students not to do any study after lessons ended. Leave the rest of the day free! Get up at six in the morning, he would say, and in two morning hours you will do your homework more successfully than in four hours in the evening.

Everything is like in any other school, except...

Except that the first display that hits you in the eye when you enter the building is addressed not to the children, but to their mothers: 'Mother, remember that you are the main teacher, the main educator. The future of society depends on you.' Then there are pictures with advice for mothers. The first piece of advice is: 'Mothers, tell your children folk tales.'

Then there is another large display board, this time addressed to the children: 'Take care of your mothers!'

In another place, in large letters, is the message: 'Without mothers there are no poets or heroes.' (Gorky). On this display are oil colour portraits of M.A. Ulyanova, A.K. Timiryazeva, T.S. Repina, L.T. Kosmodemyanskaya, O.O. Ostrovskaya, Z.M. Konstantinova (mother of two heroes), A.A. Mayakovskaya, and A. T. Gagarina. Sukhomlynsky believed that feelings of patriotism grew out of love for one's mother...

I cannot resist describing some of the other displays on the walls of the school:

'The most valuable thing in the world is a human being'. Here is a selection of quotations from Gorky, Chekhov and Tagore. In the centre are the eye-

catching words: 'A good person is ashamed to do wrong even in front of a dog.' (A.P. Chekhov)

'These books are part of the treasures of world literature. Humankind will read them eternally.' There follows a list of books from Homer to Hemingway.

Another display: 'Consider what people live on Earth for.'

'A school will only become a seat of culture', wrote Sukhomlynsky, 'When four great loves reign there: a love for one's homeland, a love for people, a love for books, and a love for one's native language.'

This is what makes the school in Pavlysh different. In place of the usual devotion to marks and discipline, culture reigns. In everything you can see an aspiration to give each child's life a high moral purpose.

We should not think that everything that Sukhomlynsky wrote is an exact description of his practice. Sukhomlynsky's books are not inventories. You should not walk around his school checking each line of his books: 'He mentions a greenhouse. Show me the greenhouse. Good. Next, a violet bush. It's not there? They dug it up? I see... Where is the story room? You don't have one?'

In fact there is no story room. In its place they have various props that allow any classroom to be turned into a story room. There are many things you will not find. Sukhomlynsky did not just describe 'the most advanced practice'. He was a scholar, and at times a dreamer.

But in this school you will find the most important thing: 'an intellectual climate', 'a spiritual atmosphere'. Without these things, Sukhomlynsky considered, study turns into pedantry, and he hated pedantry.

Two young graduates from the Chuvash Teachers College, a young man and a young woman, were at Pavlysh at the same time as I was. They were on a study trip to collect material for a graduate thesis about Sukhomlynsky. They sat in lessons all day for a week, and left stunned. They had themselves graduated from school relatively recently, and had visited many schools for teaching practicums, but never had they seen children, from grade one all the way up to grade ten, studying with such willingness and such interest.

For Sukhomlynsky this was the most important thing. He kept repeating that study is a joy, and children must be given this joy. In the last school document written in Sukhomlynsky's hand—the official 'Plan for educational work for the 1970/71 school year'—the words 'wonder' and 'amazement' appear several times. During their lessons children should experience amazement at the mysteries of nature. I would like anyone who knows of another school in whose study plan the word 'amazement' appears, to write about it. Such schools should receive special consideration.

The school in Pavlysh anticipates the interests of children. For example they do not teach boys to ride a motorcycle or drive a tractor in the senior classes, when the majority of them are already familiar with driving (it's a country town), but in grade three, when everything is a novelty and is greeted with enthusiasm. They have specially constructed small motorcycles for the little ones, and when you ask 'Who can drive a tractor?' all the boys in grade four joyfully raise their hands. Moreover it turns out they can all drive a crank-started tractor, and they all know they will learn to crank an engine at the end of grade four [around eleven years of age]. They all cultivate grain with their own hands. In autumn grade three students are allotted a plot of land about half the size of their classroom, and sow it with winter wheat. In spring the children take turns to guard the crop against sparrows, and before they enter grade four they harvest the grain, thresh it in a little threshing machine, transport the sack of grain to the mill—the whole class clambering on to a trailer—collect the flour, and take it to the bakery, where it is used to bake pastries and a big cottage loaf for the harvest festival...

Last year they baked two festive loaves: one for the festival, and one for Vasyl Oleksandrovych [Sukhomlynsky], who was in hospital, and for the first time in 23 years could not attend the festival.

That is how they graduate from primary school in Pavlysh—making their own bread. Tell people about that. And also tell them that at the school in Pavlysh they try to celebrate not just knowledge, but the success, the victory of overcoming difficulties in study. Success—that is the source of joy in study!

During the early years here, they try never to award failing marks to students, but to ensure that they overcome any initial lack of success through hard work and complete the task well. Only then do they award a mark. The principal appealed to all staff: 'Do not catch your children out in their ignorance. A mark is not a punishment; a mark should bring joy.' Here they try to give recognition for the slightest progress, to notice, to comment, to praise and to support... Here they judge students according to their individual abilities, and not according to some abstract concept of what a student should be, so that children with the most modest abilities should not feel left behind or rejected, so that school should bring every child joy. 'We should not expect the impossible of a child,' Sukhomlynsky would say. 'Any program in any subject represents a defined level and sphere of knowledge, but not a living child. To reach that

level in that sphere of knowledge children take different paths. One child can independently read and solve a mathematical problem in grade one, while another can only do that at the end of grade two or even at the end of grade three... The art and skill of instruction and education lie in the ability to uncover every child's strengths and abilities, so that each one will experience the joy of success in intellectual work.'

Here are some entries from a thick notebook I accidentally discovered among some books in the principal's office during the final evening I spent at Pavlysh. Nobody even told me about it. This was a 'Visitors' Registration Book', compulsory in every school, where inspectors enter their comments. Pavlysh was under the constant scrutiny of hundreds of people, and these are some of the comments entered in the book by voluntary 'inspectors'.

'In my view, this is the best school in the world.
— Irina Pechernikova'

'I have read Sukhomlynsky's books, and now I have seen with my own eyes the things I liked in his books. And this has inspired me even more. — Komlosi Shandor, Senior Lecturer in Education, Hungary.'

'I have spent only one day in this remarkable school where so much is happening, but I have learnt as much as I did during four years at the institute. — M. Manukian, principal of Mashtots School, Leninakan.'

'...A most amazing and wonderful human being of our time... — Staff from the Aktyubinsk Regional Education Office.'

'Pavlysh Secondary School should be renamed a university of education! We say this quite seriously: a feeling of wonder and admiration overcomes anyone with the slightest love for children and schools. — V.A. Karakovsky, principal of School No. 1, Chelyabinsk.'

And so it continues. But in the school itself, in my discussions with the children, I did not detect any traces of special pride in their school. For the students, their school is not the best, not 'famous', there is nothing put on for show... It is just a school.

to be continued next month

