

Sukhomlynsky News



Painting by Taras Shevchenko, Ukrainian poet and painter

Important 2025 publication: Sukhomlynsky's Correspondence

In 2025 the National Academy of Educational Sciences of Ukraine and the Sukhomlynsky State Scientific and Pedagogical Library of Ukraine published a collection of Sukhomlynsky's correspondence under the title *Vasyl Sukhomlynsky and his Correspondents: His epistolary legacy against the backdrop the times*. This Ukrainian language publication was compiled by Sukhomlynsky's daughter Olha Sukhomlynska, and his granddaughter Lesia Sukhomlynska, assisted by Oksana Boiko, Oksana Vyshniak and Nataliia Chala, all from the Sukhomlynsky State Scientific and Pedagogical Library of Ukraine. Some of the content, such as *Letters to My Son*, was written for publication, and presents Sukhomlynsky's ideas in epistolary form. Some of the official and private correspondence has been published elsewhere in journals or memoirs. Some is being published for the first time. The work as a whole is an invaluable resource for those seeking to understand Sukhomlynsky's character and to understand more about his private opinions.

Sukhomlynsky's personal correspondence with friends, writers and colleagues during the final three years of his life is especially revealing, showing that he was appalled at the level of youth crime in the Soviet Union during the late 1960s and highly critical of the work of the majority of Soviet schools at that time. We also learn that he was an admirer of Oles Gonchar's novel *Sobor [Cathedral]*, and keen to gain access to plays by Mykola Kulish and to Robert Havemann's suppressed work *Dialectic without Dogma*, originally written in German, and only available in a Polish translation. He clearly felt the restrictions imposed by Soviet ideology.



The Everlasting Spring

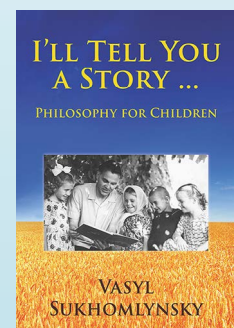
Dear reader,

I hope you are well.

This month's newsletter presents the first instalment of a 1970 article that first appeared in the Ukrainian newspaper *Literaturna Ukraina*, and was recently republished in a 2025 compilation of Sukhomlynsky's correspondence. The article is poetic in style and represents a significant defence of Ukrainian language and culture. It generated much interest in Ukraine and even amongst the Ukrainian diaspora, and many readers wrote to Sukhomlynsky in response to it.

Best wishes,

Alan Cockerill



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The Everlasting Spring

(From Letters to a Teacher of Language and Literature)

My dear friend,

I have received your letter, filled with concern about your pupils' command of their native Ukrainian language. You write that your three years of teaching in a village school have brought you much grief: the children make serious mistakes in their written work, and an eighth-grader's composition describing an autumn day reveals a poverty of both thought and vocabulary. What is to be done? There is so little time for the study of grammar and literature. In your view, this is the heart of the problem.

Your anxiety and concern are close to my heart and understandable. Early in the autumn of last year, I happened to visit an old village on the banks of the Dniro. It was the middle of September, when in our Middle Dniro region the whole world is fragrant with apples and sun-warmed wheat. On dewy mornings the dark blue watermelons and red tomatoes still glisten in the sunlight, though the swallows have already departed and the skylark has fallen silent. Only a cricket, timidly greeting the faint evening star that flickers gently in an ash-grey sky, is reluctant to bid farewell to summer.

There I met an old friend of mine, Grandpa Varfolomii—a fisherman, a hunter, and a poet. Throughout his entire life he had never killed a single hare. Only now, in his old age, did I understand why he had been content for the whole district to regard him as a great hunter. He knew that if people believed the woods and marshes belonged to a hunter, neither hunters nor fishermen would venture into his cherished domain. And so the hares, the carp, the foxes, and the partridges all lived there in peace.

The old man led me to the Everlasting Spring. It was a little spring beneath an ancient maple in a grove that, by some miracle, had remained untouched. Mighty oaks, graceful willows, and clusters of guelder-rose bushes flourished there in the open. It was Varfolomii who had given the spring its name. For more than sixty years he had cared for its crystal-clear waters. Every spring he emptied it, carefully scooping out the silt. 'One mustn't disturb the bedrock,' he explained, 'Or the spring will die.'

We reached the spring early in the morning. From a hollow in a maple tree the old man took a clean willow dipper, and we drank the water. I was going to say that it was fragrant, when Grandpa Varfolomii said, 'In summer many people come to our village for their holidays. They come from Moscow, Leningrad, Murmansk. Some drink from my spring. This water is unlike any other—it carries the true strength of the earth and the sun. Drink it, and you feel yourself standing more firmly on your feet, walking with greater confidence. Only one thing troubles me: who will care for the Everlasting Spring after me? It is fed by a tiny source, so delicate and fragile, like a drop of dew resting against an ear of wheat. Forget it for a year or two, neglect it, and the Everlasting Spring will fill with silt and perish.'

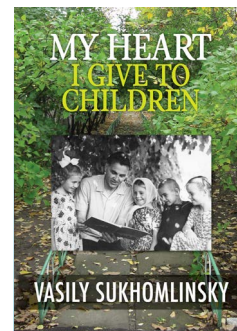
'I look at the adolescents and the young people and ask myself: which of them is ready to receive this drop from my hands? My heart aches. I have not yet found a single restless soul who would truly care about the fate of this gentle yet powerful spring.'

On our way back to the old man's cottage, we passed through the yard of a small primary school. Grandpa Varfolomii whispered, 'I studied in this very schoolhouse. It all seems like a dream. The morning was just as bright, and I sat by that open window just as fair-haired as the little

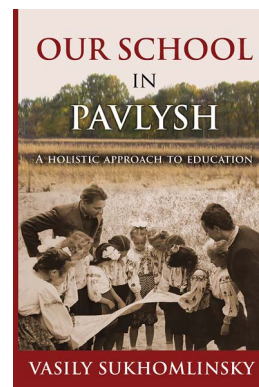
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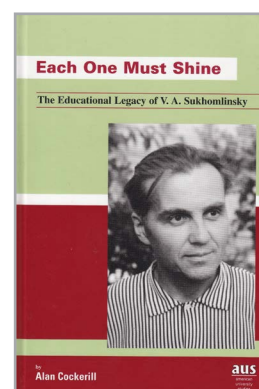
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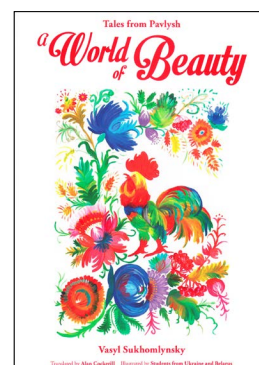
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boy sitting there now ... Even this old lime tree was already old in those days.' He spoke in whispers so as not to disturb the teacher. We were sitting beneath a century-old lime tree outside the open window. We could hear everything the teacher said. We could hear the children's voices. I felt embarrassed, as though we were uninvited guests who had quietly sat down at someone else's table. Yet some mysterious force drew me to that hidden classroom, compelling me to hold my breath and listen to every word.

'Children, think of a sentence containing a verb,' the teacher said.

(Why 'think of' rather than 'compose'? At that moment I wished with all my heart that Grandpa Varfalomii would not notice the awkwardnesses of which we had become involuntary witnesses.)

Silence fell over the classroom. Then the children's voices spoke up:

'The pupil goes to school.'

'The pupil reads a book.'

'The children went to the cinema.'

'The collective farm worker goes to work.'

'The tractor ploughs the field.'

'The steamboat sails quickly.'

'The rabbit eats hay.'

'The watchman walks around the shop.'

After every sentence came the teacher's approving response: 'Yes, that's correct.' The more attentively I listened, the more painfully my heart contracted. I remembered Grandpa Varfalomii's words about the tiny spring—so delicate, so fragile, like a drop of dew—that could so easily become choked with silt. A frightening thought came to me. This little school was itself one of those springs that must never be allowed to die. Somewhere deep beneath the earth a frail source was still struggling to flow, yet it had already begun to silt up. The spring was drying out. What would become of it? For in the sentences the children were 'thinking up' there was such indifference, such lifeless monotony, that I found myself asking: can this really be living language? Could these truly be the children's own thoughts—those lively, restless, mischievous youngsters? Their sentences mentioned pupils, collective farmers, rabbits, watchmen, tractors and steamboats. But none of these were images drawn from the living, many-coloured world that, just outside the window—one glance at the green school lawn was enough—was blossoming, shimmering, singing, and glowing with all the colours of the rainbow. Everything had become a lifeless shadow. The pupil was no more alive than the tractor; the watchman no more alive than the rabbit. Had a child accidentally said, 'The pupil is sailing' while 'the steamboat is walking,' or 'The collective farmer is

eating' while 'the rabbit is riding,' no one would even have noticed.

I was overcome by a feeling of dread as I watched the living stream of language freezing before my very eyes into a lifeless shard of ice. I felt ashamed in front of Grandpa Varfalomii. My soul burned with the feeling that I was washing my hands in his Everlasting Spring while he looked on reproachfully at my sacrilege. Timidly I glanced at him, then breathed a sigh of relief: he had withdrawn into his own thoughts and apparently had not been listening to what was being said in the classroom. Then I noticed a spark of curiosity in the old man's eyes. What had caught his attention?

'That wasp,' he whispered. 'Look how it's throwing itself against the windowpane. Why does it keep doing that? Why doesn't it crawl into its nest? The nest is right there beneath the window—you see that little opening?'

The wasp buzzed and seemed almost to weep in its desperate struggle. High in the deep blue sky a wedge of cranes cried softly as it journeyed towards warmer lands. Somewhere beyond the village a cart rumbled along the hard-packed road, while above a distant burial mound the shimmering haze quivered in the autumn air. All this made the pain tighten around my heart even more. It was grief for the children—and for that narrow channel of the little spring that was slowly silting up. I longed to walk into the classroom, to look the teacher in the eyes, to take her gently by the hand and ask her to lead the children outside—to that green meadow beneath the spreading branches of the ancient lime tree, to the cries of the migrating birds, to the ringing music of wheels upon the country road, to the plaintive buzzing of the trapped wasp, to the trembling haze above the distant steppe.

My dear friend, in those moments I remembered your letter. If one lesson like the one we had just witnessed were to be repeated ten times over, what would really change? Shadows would remain shadows; the ice would remain ice. Let us reflect, my friend, on what we heard that quiet autumn day in the little village primary school. Let us reflect—and be deeply moved. Let us reflect and be outraged. For unless we feel both sorrow and righteous anger, our thoughts about these painful realities of school life will never become the plough whose handles we must grasp firmly if we are to break the soil and cut even the first furrow.

What, then, should stir our minds? What should awaken our indignation?

Words have become grey and colourless in too many of our language lessons—that is where the tragedy lies. We forget, my dear friend, that human speech has lived and developed through the centuries not merely because one person needed to communicate a thought to another. Humanity created the word for an ear of wheat not simply because that ear contains our daily bread. That word burst into consciousness as a spark and began to sing upon our lips with the melody of living speech because human beings stood in wonder before the ear of grain itself, before the beauty and grandeur of existence, before the strength of their own hands and the wisdom of their own minds. Wonder—astonishment—is the first little flame that kindles the torch of thought. That is why words continue to burn and glow within our language; like unfading stars, they attract the gaze and thoughts of philosopher and artist alike.

It is this poetic dimension of language that concerns us. Our mission, you and I, my dear friend, is to awaken, nurture and strengthen a love of words. We must lead each child to that summit of spiritual development from which the beauty and greatness of everything created by our people throughout the centuries can be discerned—a path along which every generation handed to the next far more than it had itself received from its fathers and grandfathers.

For centuries the language of the people has been the full-flowing river we call poetry. The poetic quality lived within each word, and no word could exist without it, just as a river cannot exist without water, nor flooding waters without depth. Our grandfathers and great-grandfathers were poets. During the long autumn and winter evenings, as we listened to their tales of the Straw Bull, Baba Yaga, Ivasyk-Telesyk, and the Three Brothers, we were attending a priceless lesson—a lesson that can truly be called the creation of language, of consciousness, and of the spirit of the people within each new generation. Through their words our forefathers handed down to us their commandments, their love for their native land, and above all their love for their native tongue. In the sounds of our native language we learned far more than the meanings of words alone.

I recall my grandmother Maria's tale of the

Straw Bull. Even now I seem to hear—as though they had only just been spoken—the words 'dark forest', 'open plain', 'black cloud', 'the beaten road', 'the bright horizon', 'the misty distance.' They are not merely intelligible to me; they are dear to me. That fairy tale revealed the poetic dimension of language, and that radiance will remain with me until my final breath. My heart sings whenever I hear the words 'horizon', 'far distance', 'little cloud', because they entered my consciousness together with a sense of wonder at the beauty experienced by my distant ancestors, when, as when a piece of flint is struck with steel, the first spark of a new thought leapt into being.

Let us ask ourselves, my dear friend, how we can imprint upon a child's memory the very day on which he first truly hears the words of his native language, experiences joyful wonder, and feels his heart beat faster. How can we ensure that instead of the lifeless, colourless sentence, 'The pupil goes to school', a child speaks vivid, living words about that bustling autumn morning, about the thousand-stringed harp of earth and sky whose music Grandpa Varfalomii and I heard beneath the lime tree? Let the children say:

'The wasp is beating against the window. Why is it doing that?'

'The little sun is playing in the drops of dew.'

'The wind has fallen asleep in the meadow.'

'We are sitting in our classroom, and outside our window stands an ancient lime tree.'

... Tell me how beyond the hill

The dear sun goes down;

How a rainbow over the Dnipro

Borrows water for its colours;

How a spreading poplar

Has stretched out its branches ...

While above the quiet water

A willow bows its head. (Shevchenko)

Those words have entered my soul forever. Heard from my mother's lips, they revealed something at once mysteriously enchanting and yet astonishingly clear, almost painfully comprehensible. I felt—and that feeling has remained with me throughout my life—that poetic language embodies a kind of miracle. It enchants us; it reveals the beauty of the world.

[To be continued in the next issue.]