

p. Igor Zar
Ukrainian Spiritual Giant.

*“ The world can be seen not only
with one’s eyes, but also
with one’s heart.”*

Vasil Yeroshenko

My dear!

What stories have we not heard, what miracles have we not seen while living in this world, which amazes us with its discoveries. Recently, thanks to God, I have been lucky to become acquainted with the life of the great Ukrainian, Vasil’ Yeroshenko.

This discovery to the world and Ukraine was made in 1977 by Nadiya Ghordiyenko-Andrianova. Five years of her tremendous work resulted in publishing of the book

“ I sparked a fire in my heart...”

It is desirable that our younger generation should also know about the famous son of Ukraine and his self-sacrificing life, serving to us as an example. I have written a brief review of this book and some other interesting sources for the people who have good eyesight, strong hands and feet and complain constantly about their fates. I want to show them the way to live, to struggle for their lives and not to waste their time.

Vasil’ Yeroshenko, the son of Yakiv and Yevdokiya was born on January 13, 1890 in the village of Obukhivka not far from Stariy Oskil in Biloghorshchina (now Russia).

Vasil’ had a powerful protector in Heaven, and so he was able to get over many severe trials and reach the stars and become a great man, a living legend. His parents had seven children. They were decent masters and being religious, went to church.

Vasil’ was growing up to become a strong and healthy boy. He had started to walk before he was one year old and to speak nearly in his cradle. His grandma, Kalyna, told him a lot of folk tales and stories. He especially loved listening to those about the Ukrainian avengers Ustyn Karmelyuk and Oleksa Dovbush.

The boy was curious and very cheerful, with a bell-like voice. He could be seen everywhere, giving joy to everybody. But all of a sudden he had the misfortune to fall ill

with measles, followed by pneumonia. The disease turned out to be quite serious and it was a wonder that he recovered. But everlasting night set in for Vasil' after the disease; he was only four then.

“Why is it so dark in here, Mum? I cant see you... . Switch on the light.”

At the age of seven Vasil'ko started to play the violin and, with time, to play the guitar and the piano. He was extremely talented and imaginative. He had a nice voice and tenacious memory. He was always surrounded by the village children and he loved to tell them his interesting stories.

In 1899 Vasil'ko was sent to school for the blind in Moscow where he had been studying for ten years. In the primary school he was taught religion, languages, arithmetic and, in the course of time, geography, history and literature. The pupils of the school also learned to cover books, to weave carpets and baskets. Besides, they had gymnastics there, music, choral singing and braille (1809-1852).

The school was known for its strict discipline. The pupils of the school were not allowed to go home on their holidays.

Lui was a village boy from France who had accidentally pierced his eye.

The inflammation of the eye caused blindness. At the age of ten he was sent to the Institute for the blind in Paris.

He successfully finished it when he was sixteen and became a splendid organist. He was left to teach students at the Institute after finishing it . He worked hard to improve braille days and nights. In 1829 he achieved great success, and all the world has been using it since then.

The teacher of music, Serghiy Dibrovenko, wanted Yeroshenko to enter the Conservatory after finishing school. But lack of money made it impossible. Then he arranged for Vasil' to play the violin in one of the Moscow restaurants “Yakir”.

Vasil' had to earn his living himself as there were six more children in the family besides him. The blind youth fascinated people with his playing the violin. One day, Hanna Sharapova, a sister of Lev Tolstoy, came up to him and proposed him to continue his studies at the Royal College in London and in the Academy of Music for the blind. After that Vasil' went to play in other restaurants, started giving concerts in the Caucasus in order to collect

money for his journey. Besides, he mastered Esperanto in a few months. In February Yeroshenko set out on his journey to England by himself.

In his joy he wrote his first poem in the new language: “There is no one in the world happier than me; I see the Sun, I see the Light...”

In three months after his coming to England, Vasil’ spoke English easily and fluently, trying to master French at the same time. He learned successfully to play the violin in the Academy of Music, and soon he was able to play the most complicated musical compositions by Hlinka, Chaikovs’kiy, Paganini. At the Royal College he was taught to operate a special typewriter “Stensby” for the eyeless. The place was known for very good gymnastics lessons for the blind in the open air.

The founder of the college, headmaster Campbell had also organized for his students a long trip on bicycles from the suburb of London to Derby, which was very successful and no accident occurred. Our Yeroshenko was among the other twelve boys then. All the newspapers of those days wrote about that sensational event.

And again, for lack of money Vasil’ had to return home. At parting his teacher, Fillimor, gave him the typewriter which proved to be very useful to Vasil’ in his life later.

Just before summer holidays, a blind friend of Vasil’ invited him to his place in Paris. It was there that Vasil’ issued his first book of poems “For the Sake of Mankind.”

Within two weeks all the books were sold out and Vasil’, quite unexpectedly, grew almost rich. He had been to Finland and Austria. Newspapers and magazines of those days wrote favourably about him in many countries.

In September 1912, he arrived to Moscow and went to the Consulate of Japan and found a teacher of Japanese there. After a few months he was able to speak Japanese.

Soon afterwards he went to his native village Obukhivka. People found it incredible that having become a scientist, and having visited so many countries, Vasil’ did not grow proud, not in the least.

A young boy once came up to him and said: “How many things you have seen, Vasil’! You are lucky.”

“Yes, I have seen a lot, and I thought many things over, he said, but I want to see much more of the world. A man of mind and heart won’t submit to his fate.

And the world can be seen not only with one’s eyes but also with one’s heart.

If your heart is blind and deaf, your eyes won’t see anything either.”

In April 1914 Yeroshenko arrived in Tokio. It was a very warm spring.

In the enormous town he was guided by the Sun, refusing the help of the sighted guiders. From time to time he went to the cinema and to the theatre with his new friends.

Afterwards Yeroshenko became an external student of the Tokio blind masseurs’ school. It was beyond belief, as foreigners hadn’t been admitted there before; headmaster of the school had to conduct talks with the minister of Education. Vasil’ was given a good teacher who taught him the secrets of Japanese massage. Besides, Vasil’ attended different lectures; especially he loved medicine and psychology. The Japanese grew very fond of Yeroshenko, and every Saturday they gathered at the place of the University official whose daughter played the piano, and Vasil’ played the violin in his embroidered shirt, brought from Ukraine.

Shaking hands with people, Yeroshenko could exactly define a person’s nature and was very seldom mistaken. He had a very good intuition. He could tell the difference between the forest and the field flowers by their smell; he could tell apart the trees by the rustle of the leaves. Vasil’ could feel with his skin and all his body whether the Sun was shining, or whether the sky was covered with clouds and could clearly recognize day from night.

Once he said to a Japanese who was very sad: “You live near the forest and you can only see trees and nothing more. I know it from my own experience: forest sets your mind at rest, but at the same time, it plunges you into gloom. Go to live with people and start working together with them and for the sake of them, and that will drive your melancholy away.”

In the day time Vasil’ delivered lectures at the University in Tokyo, and after the lectures he gave people a massage. Japanese magazines were publishing his wonderful novels, poems, and tales at that time.

Giving concerts to the students in Tokyo and then in Peking, he fascinated all those present with fine Ukrainian folk songs.

He especially liked to sing the ‘Testament’ by T. Shevchenko, ‘The Bewitched’ and others. One day Vasil’ was found at a rather unusual work. He was feeling all over his head and face with his left hand, and with his right hand he was producing the sculpture of it from clay...

In the evenings, feeling tired after his studies and work, Vasil used to go out of town to the bank of a quiet lake to take a rest in the buoyant restaurant, where he liked to listen to one girl who was singing very nicely there.

One day she came up to him and asked him why he was sitting in the corner with his head hanged in sorrow. Vasil’ raised his head, opened his eyes wide and she was horrified to see that he was blind. That very moment she sharply turned away from him and left him alone. It was a hard blow to him and it was then that he took an oath not to get married so as not to become a burden to anybody.

In 1916 in Tokyo a famous Indian writer, Rabindranat Taghor, delivered a public talk about religions in which he stated that Christianity was much weaker than the eastern religions.

Then young Yeroshenko took the floor and struck everybody by his profound knowledge of Christianity, his precise reciting of the Bible, Islam and Buddhism, and convinced everybody of great power of the Learning of God and Jesus Christ .

The victory over the generally recognized master of thought in the south-eastern Asia brought good fame to the young Ukrainian youth. Taghor agreed with his arguments and they made friends after that. A Chinese writer Lue Seen’, a physicist Albert Einstein, a philosopher Bertran, Russel and others maintained friendly relations with Yeroshenko.

In July 1916, about 40 persons came to see him off to Thailand. In Bangkok Vasil’ learned the language of Thai within two weeks. His phenomenal memory and due diligence helped him a great deal. The fame about his wonder-working hands spread all over the country in no time and the infirm were coming endlessly to him from afar.

The main aim of Vasil' was to found a school for the blind children. But the government wouldn't even listen to it. After living there for half a year, Yeroshenko decided to visit Burma, India, Java Island and even started to learn Malayan.

In January, 1917 Vasil' arrived to Burma where he worked with blind children. He was twice in India, and in June, 1919 he came to Japan again and leaving it forever in 1921, he found himself in Vldivostok.

It was wartime and Yeroshenko couldn't get home. He stayed for some time with kind people in the Ukrainian village of Povarivka on the bank of Ussuri river. There he met a very nice fair-haired girl, named Tosya, who wanted to marry him. But Vasil' was a man of strong will and remembered his oath, saying that a blind man can't make any woman happy, as Shevchenko wrote in his poem. Besides, Vasil' felt drawn to wanders and called himself an incorrigible tramp.

In August, 1921 Yeroshenko came to China. The Japanese and Chinese press wrote a lot about the blind traveller. Vasil' visited Harbin, Shanghai. He learned the Chinese language and at the beginning of 1922 he was invited to give lectures at the Peking University.

In 1923 Vasil' left China and returned successfully to his native Obukhivka where he hadn't been for nine years. People came to ask him whether he feared to travel about the unknown countries being unable to see. In answer to their questions he said: "No, I don't know what fear is. I have never done any harm to anybody, so what have I to be afraid of? People were always kind to me. And you, my dear Mother, you have always been with me.

Sometimes while walking I felt as if something horrible was going to happen to me, and then I heard a kind of your soft voice at that moment, a sort of warning. I stop and hear somebody call out to me from the outside: Where are you going? There is a steep there! Another time I nearly fell into the river. And it was you who stopped me and saved me again.

So, Mother's prayer can lift you up from the ocean floor. In such a strange way Yeroshenko was safeguarded by God all his life.

He was a tall man with curly golden hair and fine features. He used to get up at dawn at four o'clock and do his morning exercises. He was known for his endurance during walking-tours

into the mountains; he swam very well and could bathe till the river was covered with ice, he could ride a horse and was a very strong man. He was able to recognize people by their steps and smell. He played the guitar and was wearing a round-faced watch. As he said he could see with his fingers; he was touching the faces of his good friends or the sculptures when he went on excursions.

In all the countries Yeroshenko visited, he put down their tales and legends, and wrote about them in his reminiscences and poems. He was a very good talker, lively and cheerful and very well-known in many countries of the world, however, he never grew proud. He was an ordinary man, kind-hearted and very modest in his plain and ascetic way of life.

Yeroshenko was a true patriot of his Ukraine and at the same time, he loved all the people of those nations to which he was brought by the divine intent.

In August, 1923 at the world-wide congress of esperantists in Germany, Yeroshenko won the first prize for a wonderful reciting of his poem “The fortune-telling of the gypsy.”

The poem was about the fleetingness of human’s happiness, about traitorous friends, about everlasting love and vainness of maidenly dreams. Even the grand jury applauded him. Besides, they were amazed at his speaking German so fluently.

In July, 1929 Vasil’ set out on his journey from Obukhiva to Chukotka in order to find his younger brother, a veterinary, from whom he hadn’t heard for long. And he did find him. Yeroshenko learned the Chukchi language very quickly, and the local citizens grew fond of him at once. In Tundra, 70km afar lived a man who knew a great number of northern tales, so Vasil’ decided to get to him. On his way there he was caught in the snowstorm. The harness (gear) of dogs tore off his skis and he found himself under the threat of death. He was fully covered with snow. His situation was horrible, but Vasil’ hoped for God’s help and a real wonder happened! In a few hours the guide-dog together with the others got on the trail of him, shoveled away the snowdrift and started to lick his face. Everything finished happily.

In spring 1930 Vasil’ Yeroshenko came to Moscow and started to work as a corrector at the printing thermography plant as not established translator in the institute for the blind. The communist government wanted him overhear foreigners’ talks in the hotel, but he

refused them flatly. For that very reason, just after his death, the bolshevics reduced to ashes all his manuscripts which made up about 3 tones by weight

At the end of 1934 Yeroshenko was already in Turkmenistan. He was asked to arrange education for the blind in the republic. Within two weeks Vasil' was able to give lessons in the Turkmen language. He gathered children from different auls; he also met homeless children among them. In Kushka, on the border with Afghanistan, near the villages of Morghunivka and Poltavka, a boarding school was founded.

People who lived there had been resettled by force from Ukraine. Yeroshenko was headmaster of the school and the teacher of History, Music, Literature, Arithmetic, English and Esperanto.

Nowadays, the blind all over Turkmenistan can get education in their native tongue according to the project drawn up by Yeroshenko. One day his pupils prepared a surprise for the citizens of Morghunivka.

They arranged a nice concert of Ukrainian songs, which made the appreciative audience fill their eyes with tears of joy and sadness in their nostalgia for Ukraine. Inspired with the success, Yeroshenko prepared to perform the opera "Koza Dereza" by Mykola Lysenko with the children.

Once Vasil' walked with his pupils 25km straight on across the mountains, guided exceptionally by the Sun, the streams of the rivers and brooks. There was one boy in the school, an orphan, Durdy Pitkulayev, who fell into the river from the steep bank.

He was drifted away with the rapid current and he couldn't swim. The boy heard Yeroshenko call out to him: 'Don't be afraid, I'll save you! You only keep crying!

Your voice will lead me to you. Vasil' could swim very well and he saved the child.

After the accident Yeroshenko taught all his pupils to swim, though some people didn't agree with him. They said: "What's the use of swimming for the blind?" But Vasil' firmly replied: "You should undoubtedly be able to swim. Even animals and birds can swim. Only silly hens are unable to do it. And you, you are human beings."

Many years passed and Pitkulayev became headmaster of the school, but with time, he grew proud of his success. Once Yeroshenko chanced to visit the boarding school and told

him then: “Durdy, that’s not kind of you. Stop being a padishah. People love someone who is simple and sincere. People are wise and won’t forgive conceit.”

In war time, the boarding school was inhabited by children who were able to see, and Vasil’ came back to Moscow, where he worked as a teacher of English. He didn’t stay there long as he was invited to Uzbekistan to teach foreign languages at school for the blind adults. In 1949 Vasil’ was in Tashkent. He often received students from the Evening Pedagogical Institute and helped them with the science of language and comparative linguistics.

Each year in summer he went to his native Obukhivka to take a rest and store up fresh energy. Especially many gifts he brought for his relatives in 1938. Before coming home he had been to Petersburg, where he participated in the chess tournament and was given a purse of 250 rubles for his success.

He bought presents for everyone, though for many years he himself had been wearing a worn out velvet. Vasil’ was quite indifferent to riches and wealth.

He very often helped blind people, he lent them money and was ashamed to remind them of their debts. He never took offence at anybody who deceived him and didn’t give him his money back. He used to wear plain and even shabby clothes which was not corresponding with his salary and position. Even his friends’ remarks didn’t have action upon him. His clothes and his food were quite unpretentious.

He had enemies among careerists, bureaucrats, time-servers; as he was a man of strong character, he was very demanding to himself and to the others. He used to tell the truth without beating around the bush, and therefore, some people considered him a queer fish.

One day, a young tankman from Stariy Oskil came to Yeroshenko. He lost his sight in the war and complained about his life. Vasil’ cited as an example the blind people he knew and said to him: “You are much more happier than me, young man. You saw the world and you have an idea about its beauty. And I vaguely remember four things only: my dear mother’s face, the blue sky, doves and the wooden church they were flying above.

It’s not too much, isn’t it? But I’ve always tried to remember Ukraine as my mother’s face in any place I have been to. If you gain knowledge you’ll move mountains. Everything depends on you, and you alone are to decide whether you are a worthy man or a grumbling

cripple”.

In the summer 1951 Yeroshenko went to Yakutia. He wanted to hear the murmur of the everlasting taiga and to organize a school for the blind somewhere in the backwoods of Siberia. He dreamt of walking from Obukhivka to Vladivostok with a guide-dog, but he felt his old age telling on him. He had no idea that it wasn't his old age, but a horrible disease, sapping his strength.

Vasil' was celebrating the New Year's Eve of 1952 together with his old friends in Moscow. He was playing the guitar and singing charming Ukrainian songs. He remembered his relatives: “ It's ten years soon as my kind mother passed away and my father died soon after the war. Our house stands deserted without them. And do you know what a saint person my mother was? How uncommonly kind!”

In Moscow Yeroshenko was examined by a highly qualified professor who had no idea that a man so poorly dressed, could know Latin. He said “cancer” to his assistant. As he hadn't been proposed an operation, Vasil' fully appreciated that there was no salvation for him. After that he went to make his farewells with his sisters who lived in Kharkiv, Donbas and Karelia. And then he came back to Obukhivka for his eternal rest alongside with his parents. He was dying with dignity and never complained about his fate.

He used to say to his pupils: “I think that the main predestination of a man is to be good to others, to live for the sake of others. I have found my continuation in my pupils and it gives me the feeling of happiness. I know: I haven't lived in vain. And you try to live in the same way, my friends, so as not to be ashamed for your lives.”

He gave his manuscripts and valuable records to the institute for the blind. All his things and money he asked to dispense to the needy and the blind from the neighbouring villages. He also asked to plant a tree on his grave and flowers, so that birds could fly around them and sing in early spring.

Three days before his death he finished his last composition and said to his sister: “Now I don't worry – here are the fruits of my thoughts. And now I can die after my hard work...” He wanted very much to live until Christmas, but he died on the 23 of December 1952. The

Ukrainian Giant of Spirit passed away calmly, lowly and insensibly - in exactly the same way he lived.

The Japanese when recalling him said: “Yeroshenko left a rich heritage on earth after him. He had a pure soul. Though he was blind, he was a guide for many people who were able to see!” Let every person, reading this commonplace story, begin to think about his own life, state the value of it and compare it with the others.

My dear, You must hurry up to do kind deeds while the Sun is shining and you have arms, eyes and feet to come to the Last Judgement. The human soul is immortal and each of us has to take care of his eternity.

And for that, one must bring his fruit of love to Heaven like Yeroshenko did in his life and wrote about it in his poem :

I sparked a fire in my heart at birth,
It flared up and overfilled my soul.
Let it blaze in my heart till my death,
Sparkling with love to you all....

I shall stir the flames to burn bright
In the darkness to flare with love,
To defy evil fate and dark night,
Saintly Freedom to praise while alive.

We, Ukrainians, can be proud in the world of Vasil’ Yeroshenko, and we must thank God for sending us this man with his heart full of love, who was a friend of all the aggrieved of the great and small nations and a great patriot of Ukraine at the same time.