

*Sadly I weep when I recall the unforgotten deeds of all our ancestors: their  
toilsome deeds!  
Could I forget their pangs and needs? I, as my price, would than suppress half  
of my own life's happiness...*

*Such is our glory, the glory of our own Ukraine!  
I would advise you so to read that you may see, in every deed, no dream but  
all the wrongs of old that burial mounds might here unfold before your eyes,  
that you might ask the martyrs: Who, when, and for what were they  
tortured?...*

*Then my brothers, clasp to your heart your younger brother – and let the tear  
sodden mother smile with joy,  
Bless your children with hard hands, and, duly washed, kiss them with free  
lips.*

*Then all the shame of days of old shall be forgotten;*

*Then shall our day of hope arrive, Ukrainian glory shall revive,*

*And a bright new world, not bathed in twilight shall dawn*

*Embrace my brothers, I beg and pray of you!*

Words penned 161 years ago by Ukraine's famous poet Taras Shevchenko. Century old prose and yet, it's sentiments fittingly reflect that of present day Ukrainians celebrating 15 years of the Independence of their homeland, because for them, Ukraine is yet to see the dawning of "a bright new world, not bathed in twilight." For many of us, this blatant lack of political progress, some may say "political regression" constitutes a criminal act – cries of "Boycott Independence day, Renounce Ukraine, close off all channels of communication" abound.- but aren't we impatient? How narrow minded and blindly are we assessing the political situation in Ukraine?

In the preceding paragraphs of Shevchenko piece he writes:

*"Learn my brothers, think, read"*

What can we learn from Ukraine today? What are the "Take-home" messages? Perhaps we should begin with the fact that fundamental political changes are not immediate and cannot be expedited. 65 years ago, on the 30<sup>th</sup> June 1941, Jaroslav Stestko on behalf of the Ukrainian people, made the declaration of the rebirth of Ukrainian Statehood. Alas, it was not to be! The enemies of Ukraine at that time were far mightier than she and once again, she was squashed by the boot of Moscow. I need not orate about the horrific doings of Moscow, as I am sure you are well aware of them, but I will make



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the point that Moscow's primary agenda was to break the spine of the Ukrainian nation. Shevchenko reminds us that even before this time in history, Ukraine suffered hundreds of years at the hands of many oppressors including Turkey, the Tatars and the Mongols; while after Shevchenko's time, those boots were replaced with those of Moscow, Germany, Poland, Romania and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. With this history in mind, it is truly a miracle that Ukraine, weakened by centuries of oppression and decades of Moscovian terror, repression and denationalisation, in 1991 managed to declare its Independence. Particularly astounding and a fact that should never be forgotten was that 91% of Ukrainian people voted for this Independence – half of which lived in those parts of the country that were heavily Russified.

In the diaspora, it was a time for joyous disbelief and celebration. Who would have thought? Very few had expected to see such an event in Ukrainian history in their lifetimes. However, not long after the declaration, disenchantment crept into the Ukrainian diaspora. What now? Where to next?

Questions about the direction of community and youth organisations were quick to emerge along with a sense of uselessness and lack of purpose. Instead of building bridges with our newly reborn homeland, the divide began to widen. We started to freely use "us and them" as differentiating vernacular. In fact, it is my opinion that in the last 15 years, our focus as a diaspora is on Ukraine as it was rather than Ukraine as it is in its present form. Only during 2 distinct events did we behave differently. The first – when Ruslana won the Eurovision song contest. The second, in 2004, when the Ukrainian nation stood up against Russia's influence in the Presidential Elections forming "The Orange Revolution". On these 2 occasions it was again easy to be a proud Ukrainian in the diaspora!. We knew exactly what to do, we'd been here before- this was what we had grown up doing- fighting, demonstrating, promoting!!!! After these two events, the diaspora returned to viewing Ukraine as a country that has no direction. The diaspora is not synchronised with Ukraine.

*"Then my brothers, clasp to your heart your younger brother"*

For us in the diaspora, this is Ukraine!! Although it has hurtled through 15 years of Independence, the road before her is still long. We need to understand that the leadership of Ukraine from 1991 was the same as that in the times of the Soviet Union. We need to understand that it'll be a long time before there is a clean break that brings with it new leadership from new generations. The decades of Soviet Communism are engrained in the psyche of Ukrainian people and its influence will have lasting effects, as evidenced by the current political situation. We need to embrace our brothers in Ukraine and bridge the gap in thinking between us. We could do this through increased communication, student exchange programs, the continued work of Ukrainian youth organisations such as Plast – Ukrainian scouts and the



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Ukrainian Youth Association- CYM who should ensure that they work closely with their colleagues in Ukraine and share more with them than just a name!

Perhaps the most important concept for us to accept is that changes for the better in Ukraine will take much longer than we expected and that in our life times we may still see the emergence of people who are ready for an historical mission- the rebuilding of the Ukrainian Nation.

Slava Ukraini!

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