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**MYKOLA LYSENKO:
RECONSTRUCTING PHYSICAL HEALTH THROUGH NARRATIVE SOURCES**

Abstract. The article is devoted to reconstructing Mykola Lysenko's physical health on the basis of narrative sources from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, above all ego-documents – correspondence, memoirs, and recollections of the composer himself and of those around him. Health is considered not only as a medical or biological category, but also as a component of everyday experience, closely connected with professional activity, family circumstances, psychological strain, and the sociocultural context of the imperial era. The article analyzes Lysenko's major illnesses as well as therapeutic practices typical of the period: spa treatment, climate-related travel, and restrictions on physical activity. Particular attention is given to the family dimension of health – the illnesses of children and close relatives, epidemics, the psychological impact of losing his wife, and the mechanisms of emotional coping with traumatic events through creative work. It is shown that the illnesses and deaths of members of the intellectual milieu were perceived as a collective experience of the community and were reflected in private discourse. The conclusion emphasizes the heuristic potential of ego-documents for studying the history of everyday life and the private dimension of the lives of figures in Ukrainian culture

Keywords: Mykola Lysenko, narrative sources, Kyiv, everyday life, health, illness.

In the second half of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, ego-documents – correspondence, memoirs, and diaries – became one of the most important sources for reconstructing the private dimension of life that remained outside official narratives. The particular value of these materials lies in the possibility of tracing not only the course of events, but also the author's individual experience.

Despite the breadth of research on the everyday life of members of the Ukrainian community in Kyiv, Ukrainian scholarly discourse still lacks specialized studies that would reveal the interdependence of everyday experience and the nature of activity and achievements of individual figures, as well as the relationship in their narratives between matters of private life, including their own health and the health of their closest family circle.

Epistolary and memoir heritage makes it possible to consider health not only as a biological category, but also as an element of everyday experience under imperial conditions, high professional workload, and constant psychological stress. Medical topics in these sources are

closely connected with family circumstances, creative activity, social obligations, and personal tragedies.

The aim of this article is to analyze Mykola Lysenko's ego-documents and those of his circle as a source for studying personal health, with an emphasis on the interpretation of illness, treatment, and lived bodily experience in the private discourse of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

References can remain as in the original, while I continue translating the main body paragraph by paragraph.

References to Mykola Vitaliiiovych Lysenko's personal health in his correspondence are fragmentary, but they allow certain aspects to be identified. In particular, rheumatism as the composer's chronic illness, the first recorded aggravated course of which, caused by accompanying pathologies, was documented in his correspondence with F. Krasyt'skyi in the spring of 1895: "I have been weak the whole time; first I was laid low by rheumatism in my leg; however, I lay for about five days and then began to recover quickly; this was before Carnival. And now, during Lent, I have fallen ill again with bronchitis, such a fierce and stubborn one that my chest has been tearing for about a week and a half. At first I had a fever, so I had to lie in bed for five days without getting up, and now I am already on my feet, though I do not go outside, and the cough does not stop, no matter what I do. Because of my weakness I have to miss many lessons, but I do not dare take risks" (Lysenko, 2004: 241).

In light of the above, Lysenko's intention to undertake therapeutic measures becomes evident. Evidence of this can be found in his letters to M. Komarov in May and July 1895 (Lysenko, 2004: 242). The main topic is the organization of the Lysenko family's rest at the Odesa estuaries.

The sources do not record whether Lysenko managed to carry out this health-related trip; by the end of 1895 the problem of rheumatism remained relevant for him (Lysenko, 2004: 248).

At the same time, special attention should be paid to the detailed description of the course of the illness, which may indicate a threat of chronicity. "I suffered from acute rheumatism this winter, though only for a very short time, and only in my leg; but although this weakness of mine is not in a severe state, it has nevertheless taken root: sometimes pain appears in the elbow bone, sometimes in the shoulder, sometimes in the collarbone..." (Lysenko, 2004: 242).

The theme of spa treatment reappears in the composer's letters shortly before his death – in 1912. In July and August, on the recommendation of Dr. T. Yanovskyi, he stayed in Nauheim for the treatment of heart disease. From there, in a letter to Petro Stebnytskyi, the composer expressed hope for the effectiveness of the treatment. "However beautiful it is here, and relatively warm in climate, pleasant, moderately hot and not dry, however orderly life is – to one's astonishment, looking at this high and, one would think, hardly attainable culture in everything from the most important to the smallest manifestations in the lives of the local inhabitants – still, the monotonous life is exhausting, and by the end of the bathing season one grows weary and is glad to fly away to one's unfortunate homeland," (Lysenko, 2004:473-474) Lysenko stated.

Lysenko linked the change in his condition to an insufficient number of balneological procedures. In the same letter one can also discern not direct criticism of the physician – Theophil Yanovskyi. He stopped the treatment course at 21 baths, although he had initially prescribed five weeks of baths and two additional weeks of rest, which Lysenko described with the Germanism *nachkuhr* – rehabilitation, post-spa treatment, sanatorium convalescence. "Perhaps because I took too few baths, the old pains are again making themselves felt. In general, I heard from many

patients there that one course of treatment in Nauheim is not enough to improve one's health..." (Lysenko, 2004:474.) the composer concluded.

After returning to his homeland, and with the obvious seasonal change – autumn was approaching – Mykola Lysenko noted a sharp deterioration in his well-being, in contrast to the relief he had experienced at the spa. "And here I felt worse than there. My legs are swelling again, though not very much, but still they are, and there I had got rid of this trouble, and while walking here, pain in the chest soon reappeared, so that one has to stop until the circulation improves," (Lysenko, 2004:478) he wrote in a letter to his daughter Kateryna.

That Mykola Lysenko suffered from heart disease is also confirmed in the memoirs of his son Ostap. Describing a trip to Kaniv, to the grave of Taras Shevchenko, he wrote: "Then we climbed for a long time up a steep hill. We walked in silence. Father stopped more than once, breathing heavily, leaning on his Hutsul hatchet-stick. It was clear that for him, a man suffering from heart disease, the ascent was not easy. But he never complained." (Lysenko, 1966:363).

Lysenko was deeply concerned about the illnesses of those close to him. In 1895 his daughter Kateryna had influenza, and at the same time his younger brother Andrii, who suffered from tuberculosis, came to Kyiv for treatment; the composer reported this in one of his letters to F. Krasyskyi (Lysenko, 2004:248).

The ailments of his relatives were a heavy psycho-emotional trial for Lysenko. "Put yourself in my position: besides hard work with the choir and other concerns, sorrow has also visited me: my eldest daughter suddenly fell ill with diphtheria. God only knows what happened to me. Thanks be to God, everything ended well: the child recovered. Now we are disinfecting the entire apartment, and rehearsals have been moved to another one, to acquaintances. Such a moral state simply broke me, 'weakened' me," (Lysenko, 2004:208) he wrote in a letter to I. Shrag.

An effective method of combating infectious diseases, besides those mentioned by the composer, was to leave the city, which had become a center of the epidemic. Thus, during the cholera outbreak in 1892, the family temporarily left for the village of Orlova Balka; from there the composer sent letters to Fotii Krasyskyi at the end of June ((Lysenko, 2004:202-203), expecting to return to the city by 15 August. Those hopes were not fulfilled, and only on 28 October, in a letter to another correspondent – Volodymyr Shukhevych – did he report having recently returned to Kyiv (Lysenko, 2004:204).

Lysenko devoted considerable attention in his correspondence to the health of his youngest son, Taras, which may be explained by several factors. First, Taras was the youngest child in the family. Second, he was also a late child – the composer was already 58 at the time. Third, his wife and the mother of the family, Olha Antonivna, died in childbirth. These circumstances probably intensified parental care and concern for the youngest son.

In a letter to Hanna Barvinok, Lysenko described in detail the tragic circumstances of the birth and sudden death of his wife Olha (Lysenko, 2004:300). In a letter to I. Franko, retelling the depth of his loss, he stressed the significant psychological trauma. He emphasized that this loss was not only family-related but also deeply personal, since his wife was for him "the sincerest friend and adviser in all my public undertakings and affairs, the helper of my best efforts" (Lysenko, 2004:301). The composer also noted her key role in raising the children in the Ukrainian spirit, admitting that "I owed everything to her... Now I have been left alone and unbalanced."

In June 1900, after less than three months had passed since his wife's death, while staying in Romanivka on the estate of the Rytskyi family, Lysenko gave instructions concerning the newborn son: "How is little dear Tarasik, does he wheeze or cough, is he pale, green? Did you call

Mykhailov? (This is absolutely, unconditionally necessary.) What did he say, what did he advise? God, how much he should go out for walks, but not in the little garden, in a garden such as the Botanical one, but with his head covered by a cap and umbrella, and his legs wrapped in a blanket, and not so that they are left uncovered. Of course, all this only when it is dry, not damp and a little warm. In addition, under your tireless care...” (Lysenko, 2004:304).

Lysenko showed lively interest in the health of his adult children as well. In a letter to his daughter Kateryna, when she was living in Krakow, he gave her specific advice on adaptation to the new environment and on mental well-being. “Are you all healthy there? What worries me most is how you, Katriusia, will get used to the climate and also to the food, and I hope that in the first days you will not fall ill, and your silence gives rise to sad thoughts: are you all healthy there? When you receive my letter, immediately write back about your health and your stay, whether you live in good harmony and peace, whether you do not quarrel sometimes. Harmony is spiritual peace, agreement of mind and heart; it is as necessary as health, and in a foreign land, among strangers, it sustains a person when he begins to miss home. So describe to us this state of mind, Katrya, and tell us in detail...” (Lysenko, 2004:329). In this same letter the composer also mentioned his two-year-old son Taras, who had not yet learned to speak, and asked his daughter to pray for his deceased mother on the eve of the second anniversary of her death.

After the profound personal loss that befell Lysenko, the composer found consolation in creativity: “Once, not long after my mother’s sudden death, returning from gymnasium, I found my father at the piano. There was no one in the whole house. The piano was at times pleading and weeping, at times whispering something tenderly and passionately... It seemed to me that at that moment, in the dearest language of sounds, he was continuing the unfinished conversation with our mother, his faithful and unforgettable friend,” (Lysenko, 1966:207) recalled his son Ostap. As we can see, the intensification of creative activity in response to life’s trials was for the composer an effective mechanism of psychological adaptation and grief work.

In Mykola Lysenko’s letters to his friend, a representative of the khlopoman movement, ethnographer, and public figure Borys Poznanskyi, who had been exiled by the imperial authorities beyond the borders of Ukraine, we find frequent and detailed information about the deaths and illnesses of members of the Old Hromada.

In December 1900, Lysenko informed his correspondent about Antonovych’s illness and the route and circumstances of his health-related trip to Italy: “Volodymyr Bonifatiiovych left on 1–2 November for Sicily, to the city of Catania, on the southern side of Sicily, at the foot of Etna. His state of health is very, very poor and required this departure. The university gave him 600 or 700 rubles for the trip. He has sclerosis of all vessels and nephritis, and every kind of ailment. Whether he will return to us at the end of April, as he said, only God knows. He was in Lviv for a few days. In Rome he suffered a stroke: one leg, one arm, and his tongue were paralyzed, and one eye twisted. But after 2 – 3 days he recovered and wrote about it himself to Dr. Cherniakhivskyi. He wrote that he was traveling via Naples to Catania. He is there already now” (Lysenko, 2004:310). In the same letter Lysenko mentions Tadei Rytskyi’s wintering in Crimea. This confirms a widespread practice among the intellectual elite of the time of choosing Crimea as a place for rest and recuperation in winter, which corresponded to contemporary views on treatment and leisure.

After Volodymyr Bonifatiiovych’s return from Italy, Lysenko, having seen him at one of the Hromada gatherings, positively assessed the results of the treatment: “Volodar, thank God, returned in the first days of June much fresher, healthier, and has felt well all summer and even

now, but as it gets colder, he feels worse”(Lysenko, 2004:322). He also reported plans for another winter stay in Crimea.

In the case of the death of Oleksandr Konyskyi, Mykola Lysenko paid attention to the cause of death – “he had been weak with pneumonia, but not severely; he died of paralysis of the heart” (Lysenko, 2004:310) – as well as to general remarks about the course of the funeral procession. The description of William Berenshtam’s death is marked by a high level of emotional intensity and detail. This difference is explained by the close friendship between the composer and the deceased. The tragic character of the narrative is intensified by the fact that Lysenko and Berenshtam had seen each other shortly before the latter’s death. “William left us so unexpectedly that it is hard to come to terms with it. I saw him in the Hromada just a few days before. He seemed to me extraordinarily pale, emaciated; he said that he had been feeling very unwell lately, complained of his heart, shortness of breath, and sclerosis. Still, he took part in the conversation, in the debates, and even, it seems, had a little supper with us (or perhaps not). And after that I never saw him alive again,” (Lysenko, 2004:393) Lysenko emphasized, drawing attention to Berenshtam’s complaints about his condition, noting his poor appearance and at the same time stressing his communicative activity.

The phenomenon of sensing the approach of the end of earthly life often stimulates a person to put life affairs in order and to complete unfinished projects, which is especially characteristic of people of artistic professions. Mykola Vitaliiiovych Lysenko was no exception in this regard. A detailed description of such a phenomenon is recorded in the memoirs of his son Ostap, which testify to the composer’s tendency toward reflection and the systematization of his activity in the period preceding his own end.

“We are not eternal, Ostap,” the composer said to his son, “so it is time for me, as our Taras said, to prepare the wagons for a long journey. I want you to help me with the work” (Lysenko, 1966:298). Thus, he helped his father organize his creative legacy, including checking the text of the opera Taras Bulba.

The composer’s trip to his small homeland, which had been a cherished dream for several decades, can be interpreted as psychological and emotional preparation for the end of life’s journey. In 1911, a year before his death, he visited his native village of Hrynky in Poltava region, as well as nearby Lypove, Zhovnyn, Svitylivka, Klishchyntsi, and others. A detailed description of the circumstances of this final trip is also reflected in his son’s memoirs, where its effect on his father’s health was assessed positively: “...and he returned to Kytayiv younger by several years, cheerful, in high spirits” (Lysenko, 1966:324).

In Ostap Lysenko’s memoirs there is no information about the immediate cause of death or a detailed description of his father’s funeral arrangements. Instead, the emphasis is placed on the reaction of the Ukrainian intellectual and cultural elite, particularly Lesia Ukrainka and Dniprova Chaika, to this tragic event.

A detailed description of the funeral is presented in an article by the Ukrainian art historian and ethnographer Vadym Shcherbakivskyi. Quoting Oleksandr Kosyts, the author gives us an idea of the first stage of the funeral and broadly presents the panorama in the deceased’s house: “The house was filled with the emptiness of death; the family wandered about with tearful eyes. It was felt that something extraordinary had happened, the full weight of which could not yet be grasped. Some student was reading the Ukrainian Psalter over the coffin. The coffin stood on the floor. Lysenko’s large portrait had been covered with a veil, and all the furniture had been removed from this room, which made the impression of coldness and emptiness even stronger. I, oppressed, gazed

at the face of the deceased... <...> The priests came. Students and female students sang the memorial service; I went home...” (Shcherbakivskyi, 2022).

Vadym Shcherbakivskyi, describing the memorial service in St. Volodymyr’s Cathedral and detailing the funeral procession – its route and the participation of numerous choral ensembles – emphasized the exceptional size of the event. Such events made it possible not only to express public protest against the existing order, but also to demonstrate solidarity and support for the communities to which the deceased belonged.

The analyzed narrative sources make it possible to reconstruct not only the spectrum of the composer’s illnesses, those of his family and circle, but also the ways in which lived bodily experience was understood in the private discourse of the Ukrainian elite of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when illness became part of everyday life and was closely connected with professional workload, family circumstances, emotional losses, and social obligations.

The correspondence materials show the gradual progression of Lysenko’s ailments into chronic conditions – rheumatism, respiratory, and cardiovascular diseases – and demonstrate therapeutic strategies typical of the era: spa treatment, climate-related travel, and restrictions on physical activity. At the same time, they record the composer’s critical attitude toward the effectiveness of treatment and his awareness of its temporary nature.

The family dimension of health acquires particular significance. Care for children, emotional responses to the illnesses of loved ones, preventive practices during epidemics, and detailed discussion of treatment measures testify to a high degree of medical sensitivity and responsibility on the part of the head of the family. The death of his wife Olha became a profound psychological trauma that affected both the composer’s physical condition and his inner world, while at the same time activating creative mechanisms of coping with loss.

The illnesses and deaths of close friends were perceived by Lysenko as a shared experience of the milieu rather than as purely private events. The detailing of symptoms, treatment routes, and circumstances of death served to record the collective vulnerability of the community and at the same time functioned as a form of emotional processing of loss.

Thus, the analysis of narrative sources makes it possible to view health in Mykola Lysenko’s life as a dynamic process in which lived bodily experience, emotional experiences, and the sociocultural practices of the epoch are combined. Ego-documents emerge as an important tool for studying the history of everyday life, making it possible to reconstruct the private dimension of a figure’s life that remains outside official biographical and medical narratives.

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