

Hope Against Hope

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February 28 - March 3, 2021

The famed Poet Osip Mandelstam born in 1891 met Nadezhda Kazin born in 1899 in 1919, and one gathers that they were married soon afterwards. They were both Jewish and had grown up in pre-revolutionary times and would be young adults during the heady early days of the Revolution, viewed so romantically in retrospect. They were intellectuals thus both living at the fringe of society as well as being in the center of it having powerful friends as the old Bolshevik Bukharin, member of the Politbureau and editor of *Izvestia*. As the revolution was progressing, the political climate got harsher, but being at the fringe of society they were not very much affected by it, but by the early 30's that would change. What follows is a harrowing tale of Soviet life as experienced by a large minority of the population, especially the intellectual and political elites the members of which were subjected to terror, the ramifications of which went well beyond those relatively narrow circles. The terror of the Soviet regime goes back to the very beginning (you cannot make an omelet without breaking eggs) but it was initially rather anonymous, such as the brutal collectivization of the peasants with the destruction of the kulaks, and the ensuing famines which ensued; but starting in the early thirties with show trials against prominent members of the political elite, the terror became more individual and thus easier to relate to, especially for foreign audiences. The story of the Mandelstams is a story of the wife trying to preserve the literary inheritance of her husband. As the climate chilled, his poems were thought of as subversive, could no longer be published, and lived on in small private gatherings in which it was committed to memory or through written notes carefully guarded and spread around for safe keeping. In the end she did survive the deportations, the war, and lived through the partial thaw of the Chrustjov years, until 1980, the memoirs written in the late 60's and published abroad in the 70's; and with her survival, also the survival of the works of her husband.

The story takes its beginning in 1934, with the first arrest of her husband, and ends by his deportation in May 1938 and his likely death later that year while in transit from Vladivostok to Kolyma, the frozen hell of Siberia. It is flanked with reminiscences from the years before and reports on her lonely survival up to her time of writing. The presentation is not chronological but jumps back and forth in time, according to the logical whims of associations connected to the process of painful recollection. This makes for a more engaging presentation making you turn the pages in anticipation. To read about hell is far more interesting than to read about heaven, but as Simone Weil reminds us, when it comes to living, the reverse is true, And the tale is indeed harrowing, not only for the capriciousness of Stalin, who remains a distant abstraction, but more so for the huge cohort of enablers representing the unopposable power of the State. The whole set-up is truly Kafkaish, run not on any principles of justice, as far as the individual, but totally capriciously where questions of guilt or not are irrelevant, contrary to basic assumptions of no smoke without fire, but with the sole purpose not only of cowing a population into

passivity but also to satisfy the paranoid impulses of one individual.

It is a drama which starts with a dreaded knock on the door. Social life in Russia, especially in the big cities such as Moscow and Leningrad is very social, whether by choice or not, due to the extreme lack of apartments, resulting in overcrowded such, shared not only by relatives but also by strangers. Lucky those who have a lease on an apartment. But also, especially at the artistic fringe, there are also many visitors, some friends but also hangers-on, who can be informers. To be able to distinguish between people worthy of your trust or not is a question of literally life and death. So when that dreaded knock occurs, the apartment is filled with people, among them Akhmatova, a close friend and fellow poet of Mandelstam, and who will appear repeatedly in the narrative. Mandelstam is removed and taken away for questioning there is then a thorough search for compromising material, more specifically poems. Some of the papers are considered of little interest and thrown on the floor, others are collected in bags to be taken off. The search takes several hours. What worries them is that poem on Stalin in which he is referred to as a peasant-slayer, even if they cannot find it written down, rumors of its existence may be enough; and even so, if there would be no case, a case can always be made up in order to fill up a quota. Nadezhda wonders whether to clean up the mess left by the security officials, but Akhmatova had presentiment that it would probably be better not to do it right away in case they would return and suspect that something might have been retrieved and taken away. They would and her hunch turned out to be right. Being arrested turns you into pariah, you surely must have done something and the mere association with you may implicate one as well. Now it turned out that a miracle had occurred. Nadezhda went to Ljubana, where she met Osip in a pitiful condition holding his trousers up¹ to learn that her husband would not be sent to a camp only exiled. According to rumor the order from above spoke of 'preserving and isolating'. Their old friend Bukharin had been notified of course, but his influence had started to wane significantly. Pasternak had received a phone call from Stalin in which the latter had upbraided him from not sticking up to a fellow poet, and had asked him whether Mandelstam was a genius or not. Pasternak had understandably been completely flummoxed, everything depended so much on this totally unexpected interchange with Stalin, a wrong word, an unfortunate tone of voice, could make all the difference. So much hung in the scales. He said something about being a genius or not was beside the point, that they would need to have a talk about serious things like life and death. Stalin hung up and nothing more was heard from him. Pasternak would blame himself for his confused response, and many have indeed blamed him, often relying on inaccurate reports on what had really happened, the memoirist liberates him completely from blame, quite possibly his confused response had reassured Stalin of his superiority: Had he claimed that Mandelstam had been a genius, he might easily have provoked Stalin's displeasure not to say resentment; had he shown himself more cocky and in charge, that likewise may not have gone too well with Stalin either. Then of course claiming a link between the two events, the phone call and the mild sentence, is also a matter of pure speculation. As in a Kafka story you should not expect logical causes and effects.

A miracle, yet in spite of what must have been a fairly mild encounter with the

¹ To prevent suicides every inmate was relieved of his belt, but many managed to smuggle in razor blades in their shoes of similar stratagems in order to avail themselves of the ultimate escape

security and intelligence forces, it had effected Mandelstam profoundly, sending him into a state that bordered on madness replete with hallucinations and paranoid delusions, the latter of course, considering the circumstances, a rather normal reaction. So they had to pack and leave Moscow and their apartment and then report at a transit center at Cherdyn² way outside Moscow. There they stayed for a couple of weeks and Mandelstam was confined to a mental institutions and made a failed attempt at suicide by jumping out of a window³. There they also had to choose a place of exile and apply for resident permits, which was far from trivial. They chose Voronezh close to the river Don, and thus close to the Ukraine. At the time it was a city with about 300'000 inhabitants with some cultural activities such as a theater and a concert, although by the description of it one gets the feeling that it was a rather small town. Living in exile was of course far preferable to becoming a camp inmate, yet it was far from idyllic. Various bureaucratic problems of getting and renewing permits, necessitating standing in long lines and dealing with obtuse officials, finding places to live, and above all to find work to do to not to be reduced to homeless beggars. In the beginning they had contacts with the theater where Mandelstam acted as a literary advisor, and they were also able to do some translating. However, those sources dried up and they had to resort to begging from friends, without which they would not have survived. The State of course took no responsibility for their gainful employment although they had barred them from all possible outlets. Nadezhda was able to occasionally leave for Moscow, meeting friends to 'borrow' from, and trying to find assignments through the Union of Writers. But three years did pass and then they returned to their Moscow apartment only to find out that its lease had been passed to their lodger. The ambulatory existence continued and failing residence permits for the capital they had to find temporary shelters in small villages outside Moscow. Life was not getting any easier. Thus they leaped at the offer of becoming temporary residents of a rest home. They did not realize that it was a trap. The place nice enough was situated twenty-five kilometers from the railway station, so in order to arrive and depart you needed transport. They were nicely met at the station, but when it came to leaving there was never any space for them. As they later realized, the authorities were set upon making a rearrest of Mandelstam, and rater than having to take the trouble to look for him they preferred to have him stored at a specific place. And indeed in May 1938 they came for him, and he was transferred to the far East. Communications with him were of course difficult not to say impossible, and later in the fall a package she had sent to him was returned with the information that the addressee was dead. This by itself did not mean much, it could simply be an indication that the officials had been too lazy to relay it, or been inclined to make a cruel joke. A little bit later she actually received a death certificate and was greatly surprised, this normally did not happen. But even so, this could be a fake. The hope of his being alive did not die so easily and for many years she looked for stories from inmates who claimed to have met him. Rumors were rampant that he had indeed been transferred to Kolyma, but they all contradicted themselves, and what to believe? Her

² A small town by the Kolva river in the Perm district north of Yekaterinburg and close to the Urals. This general region is mentioned in the Viking sagas as Bjarmia, where as late as the early 13th century Norwegian Vikings went to burn and loot.

³ dislocating a shoulder which was never properly set and resulted in the loss of use of one of his arms

situation was not unique, most inmates were interred in mass graves and registrations of deaths were rather haphazardly and not considered a priority.

What comes across in the book is the intricacies of social lives, as well as its utter importance. In the modern Western welfare state, social ties, especially tight family ones, are no longer necessary for survival. The state is basically benign and set up to take care of you; the Soviet state, ostensibly created to do the same, turns into an all powerful enemy devoted to stymie all your efforts to lead a dignified life, not only by malign neglect but also through active measures too well-known in their brutality to need to be reminded of. Social life is filled with potholes and hidden mines, you better stay clear of; but how to distinguish between friend and foe? Some of the foes are of course obvious, they need not disguise their appearances, they are there to scare and intimidate you. I am thinking of course of security officials the dealings with are hardly to be mistaken for social. But there are spies, informers, denounciators whose purpose is solely to report on you, to bring the attention of the authorities to you. Many of those are so inept that you quickly learn to identify them, but this entails being vigilant all the time, and that may be the ulterior motive in creating an atmosphere of distrust and fear. Then your friends can betray you, not necessarily by design but by necessity to save their own skins. And then of course there may be people who worm themselves into your confidence, earn your trust, although trust is something that should only be dispensed sparingly and reluctantly, it is something humans, as long as they remain human, are very eager to bestow it. In the book many people pass review, and some of them turn out to be real friends, loyal, supportive, giving desperately needed hand-outs, and taking great personal risks in providing shelter. The bonds of dependence and friendship being strengthened by a sense of making up a conspiracy. The harder the oppression, the stronger the resistance; but of course only up to a point, power can cross the proverbial red line at which point all resistance becomes pointless. In the case of Nadazha it never went so far, she was able to survive Stalinism with her integrity intact. It certainly was not easy, as her memoirs testify, but it was possible, yet of course it was not entirely due to her own efforts and remarkable fortitude, without some luck, referred to as miracles, her fate would have been sealed. A natural question is whether her fate was exceptional or not. She and her husband, especially her husband, were exceptional people, and of course the people who came to grief in widely publicized show trials were exceptional too, by virtue of being non-anonymous victims, as we have already noted; but everyone could not be a victim, the State could not kill everybody or dispose of them all in boreal camps, the society had to function in some ways. Of course there could always be the conveyor belt, perpetrators becoming victims to a new generation of perpetrators, ensuring an endless process. This seemed to be the case at the political top level. The natural question is whether there existed a core of soviet people, loyal to the regime, seeing Stalin as the great leader (he certainly appears a jovial fellow on photos) and the times, especially of the thirties, as exciting times during which great leap forwards were being made. In short a heroic time, maybe even a futuristic one, with the city of Moscow a splendid place with wide boulevards and monumental architecture, bespeaking the ultimate in modernism. A populace of a conformist bent, and hence docile and malleable, with all impulses of opposition weeded out. The Australian sovietologist Sheila Fitzpatrick, with titles such as 'Everyday Stalinism' explores that angle from a

sociological viewpoint. And of course the country could rely on hidden resources needed for a successful war effort, in which military production was of paramount importance. As we all learned early on, this will to resist could not be summoned in the name of Socialism or the Revolution but had to hark back to feelings of plain patriotism. The big (great?) patriotic war as it became known. But we are digressing, the memoirs of Mandelstama, is not sociological but individual.

The book is about a poet, and hence poetry takes center stage. The whole memoirs being centered on the struggle to preserve his heritage. As she was writing in the 60's the cause was not yet won, but at least not yet lost. There are very few citations of his poetry, translation of poetry being notoriously difficult, not to say impossible, so much of it depending on the idiosyncrasies of the language. Thus to a non-Russian speaking individual (and even to most Native speakers as well) most of it must appear rather puzzling. In poetry there is a fine line between the sublime and the merely ridiculous or trivial, and Mandelstam belonged to the avant-guard along with Akhmatova. What is remarkable though is how much popular influence poetry had, how it was part of a much larger culture than academic coteries. A successful poet may reach a much larger group of people in a serious way than a novelist can. This does no longer seem to be the case, maybe because poetry too has been vulgarized through popular lyrics a phenomenon of the 20th century. So even if the memoirs fail to convey an appreciation of Mandelstams work as such, that may never have been the intention, it nevertheless does add to the myth and intrigue of the poet's craft. The creation of a poem, at least in the case of Mandelstam (and other serious people) does have something in common with doing mathematics, pursuing an evasive truth, led on by intuition and faith (and no small amount of ambition), and in the end you know that you have solved it, what you were set to do, long before all the details have come in place. In the case of Mandelstam it started with a certain melody the words to which had to be found through a sustained struggle. Mandelstam did not use paper and pen, at least not principally, it was all in his mind, and only later did he consent to commit it to paper, because it existed foremost in the time-honored way purely aurally. Poetry is audial, it short be read out aloud, just as a play should be acted out, the written version is just a kind of score needed to be interpreted and elaborated on⁴. Poems can of course be set to music and often beautifully so, but this is an unnecessary digression, they are after all word-music, music not of tones (which themselves are meaningless and only acquire meaning in the context of other tones) but of words, which not only interact with other words in the poem but also carry meanings in themselves, thus a few lines of poetry can carry much more weight than a musical jingle, classical pieces of music need time to be worked out. Thus Mandelstam did not work sitting by a desk paper in hand. Such requirements, which Pasternak makes a great fuss about in his *Dr.Zhivago*, Mandelstam only scoffed at. He did not choose to work, work seized him, so in the middle of a social event he would retreat into himself and compose. Much of the actual writing, if it ever came into play, occurred only at the end. Once when he felt compelled to write an ode to Stalin to save his life, he did sit down by a desk cleaned free of debris, with paper in front of him and pen in hand. Out of this act of careful deliberation nothing of value came out. It was a task born not out of internal compulsion, as usual but of an external one; and

⁴ The poem as a score was something Mandelstam emphasized.

even had it been successful it would probably been too late anyway.

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