

Collecting Mandelstam

November 2006



The poet in 1910 and in the mid 1930's



Arguments about who was the greatest baseball player in the history of the game are entertaining in part because there are no “right” answers – only opinions. But there are at least data. We know how many home runs Ruth hit, and we can look up Ty Cobb’s batting average.

When it comes to the arts – painting, music, poetry – there are fewer relevant things to measure, and no yardsticks for measuring the things which are most relevant. No one would dream of judging the quality of a pianist by how fast he plays Liszt, or how many recitals he played in a year. Whitman’s greatness as a poet cannot be captured by measuring the length of his lists or by counting the lines he wrote or the books he sold.

Yet it is tempting to muse about relative greatness in the creative arts. Who was the greatest poet writing in English during the 20th Century? Who was the greatest poet writing in any western language during the 20th Century? Many would answer: Osip Mandelstam. But because poetry

cannot be translated into another language – only recreated in it – and because relatively few people in the West (outside Russia) read Russian, it would be hard to work up much enthusiasm for either side of the argument anywhere in the United States, except possibly at a Russian literature faculty cocktail party.

Russia produced many excellent poets during the past centuries. Cab drivers in Petersburg regularly quote Pushkin at length. The very best Russian poets of the 20th Century would certainly include Akhmatova, Blok, Mandelstam, Pasternak, and Tsvetaeva – and one could make a case for dozens of others. I believe that many of these Russian poets were greater artists than any poet writing in America at the time, including Frost and Stevens. And some experts in a position to make such judgments believe that Mandelstam was the greatest of them all.

Akhmatova wrote, “Mandelstam has no teacher. That is something worth thinking about. I don’t know a similar case in all of world poetry ... Who can show us the source of this divine new harmony, which we call the poetry of Osip Mandelstam?”¹ Sir Isaiah Berlin, who was fluent in both Russian and English, singled out Mandelstam from other Russian writers as a “man of genius.”²

One of the best qualified to judge was Joseph Brodsky, the 1987 Nobel Laureate in literature. Brodsky like Nabokov was accomplished in both Russian and English. In 1964 he was prosecuted in Russia for “social parasitism.” Expelled in 1972, he lived in the United States until his death in 1996. Because of his unique talent and perspective, it is better to quote him at length than a dozen others. He called Mandelstam “the child of civilization” and “Russia’s greatest poet in [the 20th] century”:

Mandelstam was a Jew who was living in the capital of Imperial Russia, whose dominant religion was Orthodoxy, whose political structure was inherently Byzantine, and whose alphabet had been devised by two Greek monks.⁴

The Revolution brought on for him “a terrifying acceleration”:

Its sublime, meditative, caesuraed flow changed into a swift, abrupt, pattering movement. His became a poetry of high velocity and exposed nerves, sometimes cryptic, with numerous leaps over the self-evident with somewhat abbreviated syntax. And yet in this way it became more a song than ever before⁵

Brodsky pointed out the obvious – that translations of such music are utterly inadequate:

The English-speaking world has yet to hear this nervous, high-pitched, pure voice shot through with love, terror, memory, culture, faith – a voice trembling, perhaps like a match burning in a high wind, yet utterly inextinguishable.

Book dealers cannot be held to the same critical standards as academicians; and collectors understand that salesmanship is an element of bookselling. Nevertheless, because book dealers have many books to sell and they cannot all be the “greatest,” the *relative* level of enthusiasm about an author or a book may hint at some underlying reality. John Wronoski of *Lame Duck Books* probably has dealt with more fine Russian literature than any other American book dealer. In the fall of 2005 he offered an inscribed copy of Mandelstam’s first book, *Kamen* (“Stone”), 1913, which he described as follows:

The first work of the greatest Russian poet after Pushkin (and one of the few indisputable titans of twentieth century literature) the pathos of this rare and fragile book would require another Mandelstam to convey in words. A holy relic.

So who was this Russian poet, Osip Mandelstam? And why write about him for American readers who do not read Russian?

Last question first. One does not have to read Mandelstam’s work in the original to realize that he led a fascinating and tragic life, which is of interest apart from the artistic merit of his verse. Also, the story of his books – how and when they appeared, the difficulties of getting accurate bibliographic information, and the travails of trying to collect these books today – will be familiar to collectors of great writers in English or any other language. But, more important, Mandelstam lived and wrote under terrible hardships – censorship, threats from Stalin’s government, incarceration and torture, extreme poverty and hunger, and internal exile. As awful as these conditions were for ordinary Russians, they were probably even worse for Jewish intellectuals. How Mandelstam was able to create transcendent poetry in such wretched circumstances, and how his wife was able to preserve his work during and after their years of internal exile, is a story of the triumphant human spirit.

Osip ("Joseph") Mandelstam was born in Warsaw on January 15, 1891.⁶ His father, Emil Mandelstam, was a leather merchant. Osip wrote that his father "had absolutely no language; his speech was tongue-tied and languageless ... a completely abstract, counterfeit language, the ornate and twisted speech of an autodidact, where normal words are intertwined with the ancient philosophical terms of Herder, Leibnitz, and Spinoza, the capricious syntax of a Talmudist. ..." Osip's mother, Flora, was a piano teacher and intellectual who "loved to speak and took joy in the roots and sounds of her Great Russian speech, impoverished by intellectual cliches."

Osip's father moved the family to Petersburg when Osip was six years old.⁷ (St. Petersburg was to undergo several name transformations during Mandelstam's lifetime – to Petrograd, then Leningrad. Today it is called Petersburg, which is the name I use.) Although they were Jews, neither of Osip's parents was religious, so he rarely attended synagogue. He remembered visiting his paternal grandfather at his home in Riga:

My grandfather, a blue-eyed old man in a skull cap which covered half his forehead and with the serious and rather dignified features to be seen in very respected Jews, would smile, rejoice, and try to be affectionate but did not know how Suddenly my grandfather drew from a drawer of a chest a black and yellow silk cloth, put it around my shoulders, and made me repeat after him words composed of unknown sounds; but, dissatisfied with my babble, he grew angry and shook his head in disapproval. I felt stifled and afraid.⁸

Clarence Brown, his biographer, writes that though Osip resisted learning the Hebrew language, his rejection of his Jewish inheritance was not permanent. His upbringing also "probably intensified a striving after religious conviction."⁹

During the latter part of the 1890's, young Osip received tutoring at home. In 1899 at the age of 8 his parents enrolled him in a fine school – the Tennishev School – which offered a classical education, combined with practical scientific and commercial courses. The tuition expenses were a burden on the family, which was far from wealthy. Osip's program covered eight years, the American equivalent of the last six years of K-12 and the first two years of college. (Vladimir Nabokov, driven by the family chauffeur, began attending the Tennishev School four years after Mandelstam had left.) Osip took the standard courses including the classical languages, German,

biology and chemistry. According to one of Osip's classmates, his grades were generally poor.¹⁰

But Osip found time to read the classic Russian authors. In his own fragmented memoir, he later remembered the family bookcase with his mother's books: Pushkin, Lermontov, Turgenev and Dostoevsky. Book collectors might be pleased to know that he appreciated the splendor of the editions, the elegance of the type, and the bindings in boards covered with thin leather. He wrote that, "The bookcase of early childhood is a man's companion for life," and his wife would later write that as an adult he kept the books he had in "his childhood days."¹¹

Like many other educated Russians, Osip read Marx but found him boring. An acquaintance later remembered that at the age of 16, he associated with a group of Socialist Revolutionaries. He may even have worked on some kind of propaganda materials. And Osip later admitted to Cheka interrogators that he had been friendly with the son of Boris Sinani, a well-known SR leader. Osip later wrote that, "My religious experiences date from the period of my childish attraction to Marxist dogma and cannot be separated from that attraction."¹²

Vladimir Gippius, one of Osip's teachers at the Tenishev school, taught Osip Russian literature and made a large impact on the young student. Perhaps more important than the classes were the visits to Gippius' apartment, where Osip "would come to him to wake up the beast of literature. To listen to him growl, to watch him toss and turn Even now it is difficult for me to free myself from the notion that I was then at literature's own house."¹³

The Tenishev school published two literary journals for students; faculty and students frequently gathered for discussions and poetry readings. Osip was apparently an infrequent participant, but on at least one occasion shortly after his graduation, he presented a poem, entitled "Chariot." A student journal reports that his reading "called forth a storm of applause," and that his poem "greatly exceeds in artistic quality the majority of our school *belles*



Mandelstam in 1914

letters and perhaps of modern *belles lettres* generally.”¹⁴ One of his poems appeared under a pseudonym in one of the *Tenishev* journals in 1907.¹⁵

At the age of 16, Osip finished his school work at the *Tenishev* School in the spring of 1907. Perhaps because of his brief flirtation with the radical SR political group, his parents sent him off to Paris, where he received his introduction to the French Modernists.¹⁶ Osip spent much of the next three years studying, writing and traveling in France, Germany (Heidelberg), then Switzerland. His wife later reported that he visited Italy twice.

In Russia the prevailing “school” of poetry during the last part of the 19th Century and the first decade of the 20th was the Symbolist group, “led” in a loose way by Vyacheslav Ivanov and Alexander Blok. The Symbolist movement was partly aesthetic and partly metaphysical. At one extreme, its protagonists believed (or asserted) that symbols were the only reality. Ivanov was the principal theorist of the Symbolists. He held weekly gatherings of writers on Wednesday evenings in his Petersburg apartment, called “the Tower,” at which leading writers, including but not limited to leading Symbolists, read and discussed their most recent work.

The leading early work in English on Russian literature prior to the Soviet period was written by Prince D. S. Mirsky and published in London in 1926. Mirsky devoted many pages to Ivanov, referring to him during the period 1905 to 1911 as “the uncrowned king of Petersburg poets”:

Ivanov’s flat on the sixth floor of a house overlooking the Duma building and the Taurida Park was known as “the Tower.” Every Wednesday all poetic and modern Petersburg met there, and the more intimate adepts stayed there, in mystical conversation and literary readings, till eight or nine on Thursday morning.¹⁷

In April 1909, back in Petersburg from his travels, Osip began attending Ivanov’s lectures and discussion groups.¹⁸ Anna Akhmatova later remembered that she first met him at Ivanov’s Tower. “He was a wiry boy then, with a lily of the valley in his lapel, his head thrown way back, with fiery eyes and lashes that reached almost halfway down his cheeks.”¹⁹ By mid-May 1909, Osip was persuaded to read some of his poems to those in attendance.²⁰

From the spring of 1909 to 1911, young Osip (then 18-20) composed a series of respectful if not worshipful letters to Ivanov. From the deeply personal tone of his letters addressed to “Very respected and dear Vyacheslav

Ivanovich," it is evident that Osip and Ivanov were well acquainted, even friends, allowing for generational differences. Osip at that time was much affected by the prevailing literary currents, and would probably have regarded himself as a "Symbolist." He wrote to Ivanov: "Your seeds have lodged deep in my soul and it frightens me when I look at the enormous shoots coming out."²¹ The following fall, Osip wrote a perceptive criticism of Ivanov's recent book of poetry, *Po Zvezdam* ("By the Stars"), saying, "Your book is splendid with the beauty of great architectural creations and astronomical systems Only it seemed to me that the book is too round, as it were, without angles. There's no direction from which one can get at it to smash it, or smash oneself against it."²²

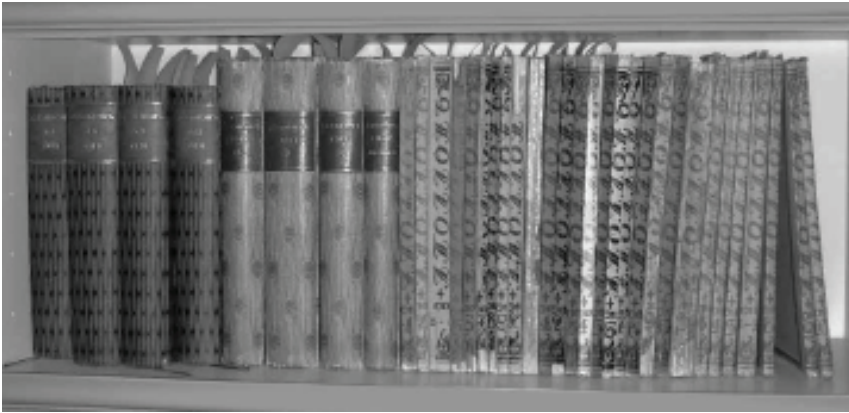
Along with his letters, Osip sent Ivanov some 15 of his own early draft poems and asked his advice about what might be done with them. Researchers have found no evidence that Ivanov ever responded to these youthfully exuberant letters.

By 1911 Osip was studying in Petersburg at the University in the Faculty of History and Philology. How he got in with his reportedly-weak grades is not known. Also, he faced the problem that the University had a "quota" on the number of Jewish students it would accept. What is known is that Osip was baptized in May 1911 in a Methodist Episcopal church; and Osip's brother later wrote in his memoirs that Osip had joined the church to avoid the Jewish "quota." Osip evidently attached no other significance to his baptism. His mother likewise didn't mind, though for his father it was reportedly a matter of serious concern.²³

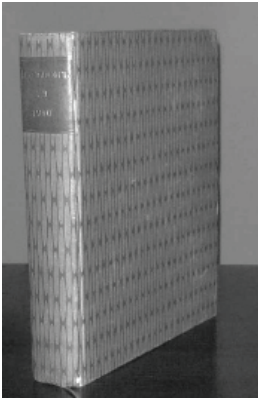
Osip was not an exemplary University student. Among other subjects, he studied classical languages and literature but was flummoxed by Greek grammar. One of his contemporaries recalled a classroom experience where Osip was called upon to discuss Aeschylus:

Again after a long silence, Mandelstam answered: He wrote Orestes. Excellent, said [the professor]. Actually, he did write Orestes. But perhaps, Sir, you will be so good as to tell us what Orestes consists of. Is it a separate composition or is it part of a cycle consisting of several tragedies?

A long silence ensued. Proudly raising his head, Mandelstam silently looked at the professor. He said nothing more. [The professor] lowered his, and with an independent demeanor, looking straight in front of him, Mandelstam left the hall.²⁴



Apollon, 1909-1917



(LEFT) *Apollon*, 1910,
bound volume;
(RIGHT) *Apollon*,
August 1910, title page



Though he continued on at the University until the spring of 1917, Osip did not finish his coursework and never received a degree.

Apollon was the greatest Russian literary and arts journal of the pre-War era. Published in Petersburg, it first appeared in October 1909 and continued until the economic and cultural devastation caused by the Great War brought it to a whimpering close in 1917. Turning its pages today, one is left not only with a sense of the richness of cultural life in Petersburg, then the capitol of Russia and home of the Czars, but also a fuller understanding of the enormity of the tragedy suffered by the Russian people as a result of the War and the Revolution.

The work of most of Russia's great poets appeared in the pages of *Apollon*. So it is perhaps not surprising that in the summer of 1909, Mandelstam's mother took her son to see the editor, a man named Makovsky. Osip's mother explained that young Osip wanted to become a poet but his parents

preferred that he go into the family leather goods business. She wanted to know if he had any talent as a poet, and handed the editor a number of Osip's poems, asking that he read them on the spot and give her his judgment. Osip's feelings of embarrassment and fear can only be imagined. His future was on the line. Makovsky read several of the poems. He later wrote that they did "not captivate" him, but knowing the importance of the occasion and sensing Osip's anxiety, the editor "went over to his side: for poetry, against the leather business. With an air of conviction, even rather solemnly, I said, 'Yes Madame, your son has talent.'" ²⁵ Osip was of course delighted, and his mother was "amazed." But she recovered quickly enough to respond that if the poems were that good, then they should be printed in *Apollon*. Ivanov apparently deserves credit for helping arrange these early appearances of Osip's verse. ²⁶

Osip Mandelstam's first published poems were the five that appeared in *Apollon* in August 1910. His work continued to appear in this journal until it withered away along with the Russian monarchy. If Makovsky's answer had been more critical, would Osip have been pressured by his family to become a leather goods merchant? Perhaps not, but his career as a poet, the opportunities to publish, the people he came to know, the experiences he had would almost certainly have been different.

Art like life proceeds dialectically (except when it doesn't); and by 1910 Symbolist theory and practice had called forth opposing schools or tendencies, principally (in Russia) the Futurists. In April 1910, shortly before Mandelstam's first poems appeared in *Apollon*, a handful of the avant garde poets and artists who would later become known as "Futurists" published their first collection, *Sadok Sudei*. ²⁷

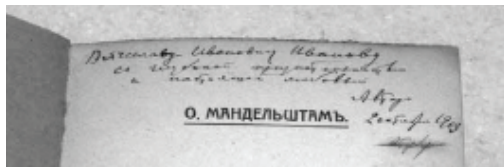
Another group opposing or contrasting with the Symbolists were the writers with whom Mandelstam would soon be identified – the "Acmeists" – including Akhmatova and her husband, Lev Gumilev. The Acmeists generally rejected the metaphysics of the Symbolists and advocated a return to "classical" clarity of the hard and fast things of the real world rather than the intellectual and linguistic haze of Symbolism. By the end of 1911, Osip was meeting with Gumilev and a group of similarly minded poets (Tsek Poetov – "Poets' Guild") to share readings and criticism. ²⁸

Though Mandelstam's poems had first begun to appear in 1910, his biographer Brown believed that the real start to his career was in 1913, when several of his poems were published in *Apollon* and other monthly journals.

Osip's first critical prose also appeared in 1913 in *Apollon*. Gumilev and Sergei Gorodetsky issued their "Acmeist manifesto" in the pages of *Apollon* that same year.

The magazine that printed the largest number of Osip's poems in 1913 was *Giperborei*. It had a short life – only 10 issues from 1912 to 1913. Three of Osip's poems appeared in the February 1913 issue, and another three appeared in October 1913. The last issue of *Giperborei* in December 1913 carried his short poetic tribute to his friend Anna Akhmatova (five of whose poems also appeared in the same issue).

But the main event in the life of the 22-year old poet in 1913 was the appearance of his first book, *Kamen* ("Stone"). It was a 33-page booklet containing 23 poems. Osip's father provided the money for the printer, and, according to Osip's Russian biographer, 600 copies were printed.²⁹ The simple, green paper wrapper was decorated with the drawing of a lion and a cupid with lyre (a reference to the Acmeists' classical leanings), and displayed the word "Akme." Many of the poems had previously appeared in journals. Akhmatova later wrote that Mandelstam liked to remember ironically how, "an old Jew, the owner of the print shop where *Stone* was printed, congratulated him on the book's publication, shook his hand, and said: 'Your writing will only get better and better young man.'"³⁰ Akhmatova may have been confused; Mandelstam remembered the remark as having been made by one Goldberg, "a fat bourgeois," who printed the verses of his clients gratis in his little magazine, called *The Poet*.³¹



(LEFT) Cover of Mandelstam's first book, *Kamen'*. First edition, published in Petersburg, 1913. *Kamen'* means "Stone." (ABOVE) Title page of same, with Mandelstam's presentation to his friend Vyacheslav Ivanov "with deep respect and genuine love. 2 October, 1913."

Mandelstam's brother remembered that he and Osip picked up two packages of the booklets at the print shop. Booksellers in Petersburg at the time would not buy for resale volumes of new poetry, except those of well-known

poets such as Blok. For unknowns like Mandelstam, they would only take the books on commission. Mandelstam decided to entrust the entire lot of his books (other than those he gave to friends) to a large book store at the corner of the Nevsky and Fontanka. From time to time he checked on how sales were doing, and when he learned that 42 copies had been sold, the family celebrated.³²

Several years ago when I was first starting to collect Russian books, an American book dealer offered me the copy of the first edition of *Kamen* that Mandelstam presented in October 1913 to his friend Ivanov, the Symbolist poet who presided over the literary gatherings at “the Tower” and to whom Osip had sent his own youthful poems a few years earlier. I gulped two or three times and decided to buy it. It is now one of the two anchors of my collection of Mandelstam. The presentation to Ivanov reads:

Vyacheslav Ivanovich Ivanov s glubokoi priznatel'nostiyu i nastoyaschei lyubov'yu. Avtor. 2 oktyabrya 1913. Peterburg.

Or: “To Vyacheslav Ivanovich Ivanov with deep respect and genuine love. The author. 2nd October 1913. Petersburg.” This inscription has been published.³³

Kamen received a handful of reviews, all friendly.³⁴ Readers were struck by the hard realities reflected in both the title of the book and the subjects of the poems, as contrasted with the Symbolist haze of hints and metaphors, and also by the precision of the images and language, as well as the metrical inventiveness of Mandelstam's verse. Gumilev wrote that Mandelstam had “opened up the doors of his poetry to all of life's phenomena that exist in time, not merely in eternity or the instant: to the casino on the dunes, the parade in Tsarskoe Selo, the crowd in a restaurant, a Lutheran's funeral.”³⁵

Pasternak, one of the greatest poets of the 20th Century (as well as the author of *Dr. Zhivago*), later wrote Mandelstam a letter responding to a complimentary review: “What did you find that is good in me? What was that flattery for? For you know I shall never in my life write a book like *Kamen*!”³⁶

A second and enlarged edition of *Kamen*, at 86 pages, nearly three times the size of the first edition, appeared in Petersburg in late 1915 (though the title page shows the year as 1916).³⁷ A third edition, enlarged to 95 pages and displaying a more colorful and modernist front cover, was published

by the State Publishing House (Gosizdat) in 1923. A fourth appeared in Petersburg in 1926.

The years immediately after the first appearance of *Kamen* were enormously eventful for Mandelstam. The War began for Russia in July 1914. The Russians did not conscript soldiers, relying largely on peasants for their Army; and though Gumilev enlisted, most writers and intellectuals did not. In contrast to the situation in England, literate, upper-class Russians rarely wound up in the front lines either as soldiers or officers, which helps explain why so few of their poets wrote “war poems” of the kind composed by Graves, Sassoon, Thomas and Owen. It also explains why so few Russian poets were killed in the War.

Mandelstam did not enlist, probably for health reasons, though he evidently volunteered for service as a hospital orderly. There is an unsubstantiated report that about this time he tried to kill himself.³⁸ It would not be the last time.

The Revolution of 1917 was both a consequence of the War and one of the causes of its termination. It set in motion changes that would radically transform life and culture in Russia; its consequences continue today to ripple through the lives of civilized people throughout the world. The Revolution brought first excitement and upheaval, then loss of property and work, grinding poverty, fear, sickness, homelessness, hunger, and (in the case of many writers of integrity) censorship and surveillance, an end to publication, repression, arrest, torture, and ultimately death. Many saw it coming and escaped to the West. Most probably didn't see it coming. A few saw but choose not to leave. Akhmatova and Mandelstam were among these.

One who saw and escaped, at least for a while, was the great poet Marina Tsvetaeva (1892-1941). She got out in 1922 but returned in 1939, and hanged herself there two years later. Experts rank her as one of the greatest Russian poets.

Mandelstam had met Tsvetaeva and her husband, S. Ya. Efron, in the Crimea in 1915. In the spring of 1916 Tsvetaeva was staying with her sister in Aleksandrovo, not far from Moscow, when Mandelstam came for visits over a four-month period. They walked in the countryside and talked of literature and life. Mandelstam wrote one of his finest poems, “Not Believing The Miracle of Resurrection,” to Tsvetaeva. It includes these lines:

I kiss your sunburned elbow and a waxen bit of forehead.

*I know it has stayed white beneath the strand of dark gold.
I kiss your hand where there is still a white band from your bracelet.
The flaming summer of Taurida performs such miracles.*

They wrote several poems to each other. By the time Mandelstam's were later published, he had married; and because of the understandable feelings of his wife, Nadezhda, the dedications to Tsvetaeva were removed.³⁹

Akhmatova wrote in her memoir that Osip was later in love several times – once with Akhmatova herself. She had to tell him they could not continue to meet so frequently without giving people the wrong impression.

Osip wrote several of his best poems to or about the women who were the objects of his affections. In one he wrote, "In a cold Stockholm bed"; and in another – "If you wish, I'll take off my felt boots." His wife Nadezhda later made sure that these dedications – like the earlier ones to Tsvetaeva – did not appear in his published volumes.⁴⁰

Finally, Mandelstam, uncertain whether or not he should stay with Tsvetaeva, left for the Crimea. Tsvetaeva did not encourage him to stay.⁴¹ She wrote to a friend that Osip had been so upset he spoke of entering a monastery and growing potatoes.⁴²

In the spring of 1919 Mandelstam "married" Nadezhda Yakovlevna Khazina in Kiev. He had gone south to the Ukraine in March 1919 in part because of food shortages in Moscow and Petersburg. Their courtship could not have been long because Nadezhda later wrote that they "first met on May Day in 1919."⁴³ The marriage was "formalized" three years later.⁴⁴

Osip's marriage to Nadezhda turned out to be fortunate both for him and for lovers of Russian poetry because it was largely due to Nadezhda that most of Mandelstam's later great work survived. She was also the author of two volumes of memoirs about Mandelstam: *Hope Against Hope*, and *Hope Abandoned*.

Mandelstam's life thereafter seems to have been one of wandering from city to city, and apartment to apartment. In late 1919 he was driven out of Kiev by Denikin's White Army, whose leaders may have regarded him as a Bolshevik. He went first to Feodosia, then to Odessa, then back to Moscow. In October 1920 he returned to Petersburg, now called "Petrograd." He continued to write poems and gave occasional readings.⁴⁵

The center of Acmeism after the War was the Guild of Poets in Petersburg, headed by Akhmatova's husband, the poet and critic Nikolay Gumilev. Bolshevism did not wait long to show its fangs. In August 1921 Gumilev was arrested by the Cheka for complicity in an alleged plot to overthrow the new government. He was shot by a firing squad about three weeks later. Sixty others were executed at the same time, including many wives of the so-called conspirators.

In 1922 Mandelstam arranged for the publication of the poems he had written since 1916 (which had not earlier appeared in the second edition of *Kamen*). These newer poems, as described by Nadezhda, were about "the war, his presentiment of revolution and the Revolution itself." In Petersburg he entrusted his "jumbled-up manuscripts"⁴⁶ to a man named Blokh (not the great poet) without resolving such matters as the title, the order of the poems, and other details. Blokh asked Mikhail Kuzmin, a prominent poet, to come up with a title. He settled on *Tristia*, after one of the 46 poems in the collection. Blokh himself apparently decided on the order of the appearance of the poems, which turned out to be chaotic. The book was printed in Berlin, to gain international copyright protection, in an edition of 3000 copies. It appeared in August 1922 though the wrong year, 1921, appeared on the cover. "Petropolis" is identified on the cover as the place of publication, though the Futuristic title page says "Petersburg- Berlin."

There were fewer reviews this time, but they were uniformly positive.⁴⁷ Professor Brown, writing much later, concluded that *Tristia* was Mandelstam's most classical book: "It differs from the 'Roman' Stone, however, in referring almost exclusively to the classical world of Greece – a fact which should not be obscured by the slight irony of its bearing a Latin title."⁴⁸

Mandelstam was unhappy with the Berlin edition of *Tristia*. He gave copies to friends with notes to the effect that it had been put together by ungrammatical people without his knowledge and against his will.⁴⁹ He soon arranged for a second edition of the collection, in November 1922, this time in Moscow. Again the wrong year appeared on the cover. He renamed this new edition *Vtoraya Kniga* – "Second Book" – and dedicated it to Nadezhda. In it Mandelstam deleted 16 poems, added 14 new ones, and presented the poems in the order in which he had written them.

The order was important to him, according to Nadezhda, because he wrote interlinked poems in chronological sequence – his poems "came in groups, or in a single flow, until the initial impulse was spent." So in arranging



When *Tristia* was republished in Moscow, Mandelstam gave it a new name—*Vtoraya Kniga*—“Second Book.” This edition deleted 16 poems and added 14 new ones.

them for book publication, he basically used the order in which the poems were written.⁵⁰

In this book’s final edition of 1928, the last one Mandelstam saw through the press himself, he reverted to the first title, *Tristia*. The order was slightly modified, and six of the poems were deleted, perhaps because of government censorship.⁵¹

Brown believed that Mandelstam’s “fall from grace” started about 1923. It was during that year that the influential Symbolist poet Briusov reviewed *Second Book* critically, attacking it as not sufficiently Marxist or “modern.”⁵² Nadezhda wrote later that,

In 1923 M.’s name was removed from all the lists of contributors to the literary magazines. Since it happened in all of them simultaneously, this can scarcely have been a coincidence. That summer there must have been some kind of ideological conference at which the process of dividing writers into friend and foe had begun.⁵³

Political considerations governed who was permitted to publish, and what got published. They also began to affect who was permitted to work, housing allocations, and the attitudes of writers and others sensitive to prevailing political winds.

The constraints seem to have applied to journals but not, at least not initially, to books. In the autumn of 1923, Osip worked on a book of auto-

biographical sketches and portraits entitled *Shum Vremeni* – “*The Noise of Time*.” The Editor of Rossiia turned it down, but it was published as a thin book in 1925 to mixed reviews.⁵⁴ This autobiographical work is the source of many of the details of Mandelstam’s childhood.

Osip was still permitted to write children’s books. In 1925-26 he published four small illustrated books of poems for children that are now quite scarce for the same reason that popular children’s books frequently fail to survive in good condition in the West. I’m lucky to have a very charming one, *Primus* (“Stove”), with drawings by Dobuzhinsky.



Mandelstam’s book for children—*Primus* (“Stove”), with drawings by Dobuzhinsky.

During the mid-20’s, Osip was also able to make a little money translating works from other languages. His biographer reports that Mandelstam was “heavily ... involved in the labor of turning French, German, even English works into Russian.”⁵⁵ Some of these pieces appeared in literary magazines. Several were published in book form during the period 1923-1928. Most were translated from French, but a few were from English (a language Mandelstam did not know well) – Upton Sinclair’s play *Machine*, and a few novels of Walter Scott. These translations have also become scarce. I am fortunate to have several of the French works: two by Jules Romains *Cromedeyre-Ie-Vieil*, 1925; *Les Copains*, 1925), one by Georges Imann (*Le Fils Chebre*, 1925), and one by Daudet (*Tartarin de Tarascon*, 1927). The two by Imann and Daudet were not even known to the editors of Mandelstam’s *Collected Works*.⁵⁶ Except for a copy of the Imann book (at the University of

Michigan), I have only a few copies of these books. I am fortunate to have several of the French works: two by Jules Romains *Cromedeyre-Ie-Vieil*, 1925; *Les Copains*, 1925), one by Georges Imann (*Le Fils Chebre*, 1925), and one by Daudet (*Tartarin de Tarascon*, 1927). The two by Imann and Daudet were not even known to the editors of Mandelstam’s *Collected Works*.⁵⁶ Except for a copy of the Imann book (at the University of



Mandelstam’s translations of four French works, issued in 1925 and 1927

Wisconsin), none of these is located in any of OCLC, RLIN, or the British Library catalogue.

Mandelstam also wrote a number of prose pieces that appeared in provincial newspapers. Nadezhda later reported that, “[F]rom the second half of the twenties it became much harder to obtain translating work, so that his right to a livelihood was always being contested. Nothing came of his books for children either.”⁵⁷

No doubt the closing down of literary outlets affected Mandelstam’s enthusiasm for writing poetry. From 1921 to 1925, he wrote (or retained) only 20 poems. From 1926 to 1930 he wrote none at all.⁵⁸ The 20 poems from 1921-25 were gathered together as the last section of the last collection published during his lifetime, in 1928, entitled *Stikhotvoreniia* (“Poems”). It took a letter from Osip’s friend and supporter Nikolai Bukharin, a top-ranking member of the Communist hierarchy, to clear the way for publication by the government printing office in Petersburg.⁵⁹ This collection, published in an edition of 2000 copies, contained selections from the earlier two books plus the 20 poems from the 1921-25 period. My copy of the 1928 collection contains four lines inscribed by Mandelstam.



(LEFT) Mandelstam in 1922.
(RIGHT) The 20 poems Mandelstam wrote between 1921 and 1925 were published in the collection *Stikhotvoreniia* (“Poems”) in 1928.



In 1928 Mandelstam also published a collection of articles, *O Poezii* (“About Poetry”), and the short *Egyptian Stamp*, a novella, which Professor Brown (who edited it in 1965) called “one of the few examples of surrealist fiction to be found in all of Russian literature.”⁶⁰ The narrative covers one day in the life of the hero, Parnok, who spends it wandering through Petersburg. One episode in the story involving Parnok’s attempt to save a nameless victim from a lynch mob may reflect in a fragmentary way an actual episode from the early 1920’s when Mandelstam himself saved certain nameless victims by tearing up signed death warrants being processed by a Cheka (future KGB) functionary.⁶¹

During the period 1928-1930, Osip was virtually unemployed. He did a little translation work (which led to a bitter quarrel involving charges of plagiarism), and wrote a few articles for a Moscow newspaper. But he and Nadezhda lost their apartment at Tsarskoe Selo, and they moved into a small flat with Osip's brother in Moscow. Osip's biographer says he was physically and mentally exhausted, and sick of literature and the constraints of Soviet repression.



Cover of Mandelstam's surrealist novella, "Egyptian Stamp."

In 1930 his friend Bukharin arranged for them to take a trip to Armenia. During this trip he witnessed some of the horrors of collectivization and soured even more on the violence of the Soviet regime. At the end of his stay, Osip wrote *Chetvertaia Proza* ("Fourth Prose"), reflecting angrily on the events of the prior two years. Osip included passages that he must have known would render it unpublishable in the USSR. ("As for writers who write things with prior permission, I want to spit in their faces, beat them over the head with a stick ... I would forbid these writers to marry and have children.")⁶²

After a decade of writing very little poetry, Mandelstam resumed writing poems in 1930. Those from the period 1930-34 were kept in two notebooks and are today published as his "Moscow Notebooks." One cycle in this group, the "Armenia" poems, was deemed publishable and appeared in the literary magazine *Novy Mir*, March 1931. A prose piece, "Journey to Armenia" containing a thinly veiled attack on tyranny in its closing passages, appeared in the journal *Zvezda* in 1933. As a result, the editor of the journal was fired; and no other work by Mandelstam ever again appeared in Russia during his lifetime.⁶³

On returning from Armenia, Osip tried to find a place to live and work in Petersburg, but the writers' organization would not have him there. He and Nadezhda were forced to go back to Moscow, where they eventually found space in a wing of the House of Herzen, then controlled by the Writers' Union.

The clouds of suspicion over Mandelstam were darkening. He and Nadezhda were under constant surveillance, which eventually led to a tussle in 1932 with one of their neighbors, a complaint, and an administrative

hearing. After the hearing and an unsatisfactory outcome, Osip confronted and slapped the president of the tribunal, a writer, Alexey Tolstoy (a distant relative of the great novelist, Leo Tolstoy).

On May 16-17, 1934, while Akhmatova was visiting the Mandelstams in Moscow, three Cheka operatives entered the Mandelstams' small apartment, presented warrants, searched the place, rummaged through Osip's papers, and then hauled him off to jail. Nadezhda later told the story of what she witnessed and what Osip told her in *Hope Against Hope*. We also now have access to the Cheka files in Vitaly Shentalinsky's book, *Arrested Voices*, New York, 1993.

Nadezhda later speculated that the Tolstoy incident might have been the cause of what had happened:

Another puzzle is: when did the poem about Stalin become known to the police? It was written in the autumn of 1933, and the arrest took place in May 1934. Perhaps after he had slapped Tolstoy in the face, the authorities had stepped up their surveillance of M. and learned about the poem only in the course of making inquiries among their agents? Or had they kept it for six months without taking any action? This seems inconceivable.⁶⁴

"The poem" Nadezhda referred to was one Osip had written about Stalin in November 1933. He had read his Stalin poem to about ten of his acquaintances. Nadezhda wrote they were "horrified" and begged him to forget it.⁶⁵ He must have known the danger, the certainty really, that someone would report him. The risk to any listener was that some other listener would report it first, and then all other non-reporting listeners would be endangered.

Here is the poem:

*We live, deaf to the land beneath us,
Two steps away no one hears our speeches,
All we hear is the Kremlin mountaineer,
The murderer and peasant-slayer,
His fingers are fat as grubs
And the words, final as lead weights, fall from his lips,
His cockroach whiskers leer
And his boot tops gleam.
Around him a rabble of thin-necked leaders –*

*Fawning half-men for him to play with.
They whinny, purr or whine
As he prates and points a finger,
One by one forging his laws, to be flung
Like horseshoes at the head, the eye or the groin.
And every killing is a treat
For the broad-chested Ossete.* ⁶⁶

As Ossetia is a state near Georgia in the Caucasus, the reference to Stalin, a Georgian, was unmistakable.

The Cheka agents were clearly looking for something in particular. They sorted through Mandelstam's manuscripts putting some (the more recent poems) on a pile to be confiscated, and the earlier work on the floor to be left behind. They did not find a copy of the Stalin poem because Osip and Nadezhda had never written it down. It existed only in their memory and that of their listeners, one of whom had passed it on to the authorities.

The morning after Mandelstam was hauled off to jail, Nadezhda and their friend Anna Akhmatova did what they could. They asked Pasternak for help, and he in turn went to Bukharin. Perhaps Bukharin's intervention helped save Osip's life. ⁶⁷

The Cheka records – including transcripts of “testimony” extracted from prisoners – have become available since the collapse of the Soviet regime. The record of Mandelstam's interrogation and confession is reproduced in Shentalinsky's book. The Cheka interrogators quickly and easily extracted from Osip the full text of the Stalin poem. He was not the kind of person who would falsely deny his authorship.

They demanded that Osip identify the people who had heard him read the poem, and he did so. One was Akhmatova. They asked him what she thought of it. He told them, according to the deposition he later signed:

With her customary laconicism and poetic acuity, Anna Akhmatova pointed out the “monumental, rough-hewed, broad-sheet character of the piece.” This was a correct assessment. For while an enormous force of social poison, political hatred and even contempt for the person depicted has been concentrated in this foul, counter-evolutionary, libelous lampoon, she recognized its great power and that it possesses the qualities of a propaganda poster of great effective force ⁶⁸

Mandelstam thought they were going to kill him. He was kept in a cell with a companion who was evidently a government stool-pigeon, who tried to scare Osip into believing that his wife was already in prison. He was worn out by lack of sleep, and the bright lights hurt his eyes. He was given salty food to eat and nothing to drink; and he was made to wear a strait-jacket for at least part of the time. At some point he became so desperate that he slashed his wrists with a razor blade he had kept hidden in the sole of his shoe. Nadezhda wrote later, "Bleeding to death is not the worst way of getting out of this life of ours"⁶⁹

On May 26, 1934, a special board of the OGPU (formerly the Cheka) handed down Osip's sentence. Nadezhda was called and told that if she wanted to accompany him into internal exile, she should come and meet him. Akhmatova went with her to the Lubyanka to get him, and Nadezhda met with Osip's interrogators. Osip was then brought in. He was in a numbed state; his eyes were glassy and inflamed, and his arm was in a sling. Akhmatova wrote that, "He was in such bad shape that even they couldn't get him to sit in the prison cart."⁷⁰ The condition of his eyes was probably due to non-stop interrogation and sleep deprivation. Osip apparently never gave his wife a detailed description of what was done to him during that two-week period.

The interrogators told them that the Stalin poem was counter-revolutionary and criminal. In these circumstances, it was miraculous that Osip was *only* to be exiled for three years, and then not to Siberia but to the town of Cherdyn in the Urals, far southeast of Moscow. Moreover, Nadezhda was permitted to go with him. Nadezhda remembered hearing the words, "isolate but preserve" – the apparent instructions from on high – no doubt from Stalin himself.⁷¹

Not long after arriving at Cherdyn and bordering on insanity, Osip again tried to commit suicide by throwing himself from a hospital window. He succeeded only in dislocating his shoulder.⁷²

Then a second "miracle" happened, perhaps because the authorities, remembering the instructions "isolate but preserve," feared that Osip might die and that they might then be blamed for his death. Or it may have happened because of Bukharin's intervention.⁷³

Bukharin was later tried and executed by Stalin along with most of the rest of the top leadership of the Party. But in 1934 he still had influence. Bukharin "was as impulsive as M... [H]e sat down and wrote a letter to

Stalin. This was an act completely at variance with our normal code of behavior, and by that time there were very few people left in the country who were capable of such impulsiveness⁷⁴ According to one report, Stalin read Bukharin's letter and wrote a note: "Who gave them the right to arrest Mandelstam?"⁷⁵

Stalin was evidently not entirely immune to the views of his colleagues, or to how he was perceived in the literary community. Bukharin had told Stalin that Pasternak was upset at Mandelstam's arrest. Pasternak was a great and famous poet, admired by Stalin in part because he had translated Georgian verse.

Whatever the causes, on June 10, 1934, the authorities lightened Mandelstam's sentence and permitted him to live in less harsh surroundings, though he was not permitted to live in any of the twelve major Soviet cities.

Stalin called Pasternak directly sometime around the end of July 1934. By that time, Mandelstam's sentence had already been commuted so Stalin's motive was less one of seeking character references than of making sure he would get "credit" in literary circles for his generous clemency.

Pasternak later told Nadezhda about his telephone conversation with Stalin:

Pasternak was called to the phone, having been told beforehand who wished to speak with him... Stalin began by telling Pasternak that Mandelstam's case had been reviewed, and that everything would be all right. This was followed by a strange reproach: why hadn't Pasternak approached the writers' organizations, or him (Stalin), and why hadn't he tried to do something for Mandelstam: "If I were a poet and a poet friend of mine were in trouble, I would do anything to help him." Pasternak's reply to this was: "The writers' organizations haven't bothered with cases like this since 1927, and if I hadn't tried to do something, you probably would never have heard about it." Pasternak went on to say something about the word "friend"... Stalin interrupted him: "But he's a genius, he's a genius, isn't he?" To this Pasternak replied: "But that's not the point." "What is it, then?" Pasternak then said that he would like to meet him and have a talk. "About what?" "About life and death," Pasternak replied. Stalin hung up. Pasternak tried to get him back, but could only reach a secretary.⁷⁶

The net effect of Stalin's intervention was that Osip was permitted to live in internal exile somewhere other than Cherdyn. He chose Voronezh, 250 miles south of Moscow.

Voronezh, though not as dreadful as Cherdyn, was far from a resort. Mandelstam suffered from angina and had difficulty breathing. He could not get work with the exception of occasional jobs composing radio scripts. Nadezhda wrote that during this exile, "there could be no question at all of his publishing any original work, and neither was he given translations any more. Even his name was no longer mentionable – during all those years it cropped up only once or twice in denunciatory articles."⁷⁷ The Mandelstams lived on hand-outs from virtually-impooverished friends such as Akhmatova and Pasternak.

During the first year in Voronezh, Osip wrote no poetry. But in early April 1935, after attending the concert of a young visiting violinist, he began to write again. A young friend, Sergei Rudakov, wrote about it to his wife:

Yesterday we went to a concert by the violinist Barinova... She has the most extraordinary Tsvetayeva-like temperament... (When I said so, Mandelstam was surprised: how could I have spotted a genuine resemblance to Tsvetayeva when I had never seen her? But the rhythms of her verse?!) And see what I achieved. After a year or more Mandelstam wrote his first four lines of poetry. About her, Barinova, after the things I said...⁷⁸

Rudakov would likely have had no way of knowing that Mandelstam had once been in love with Tsvetaeva.

The poems Mandelstam wrote while he was in internal exile in Voronezh are among his greatest and most difficult. To use Akhmatova's phrase, they are his "passport into immortality."⁷⁹

The story of how these later poems were saved is itself worth telling. Before his first arrest in 1934, Osip had kept his poetry in his memory, on scraps of paper, and in notebooks. Two of these notebooks had been kept in a trunk that served as Osip's archive.⁸⁰ During the arrest in 1934, the originals of many of these poems were confiscated by the police. They were later reconstructed by memory and written down in Voronezh. But the police failed to find copies of some poems that Nadezhda had hidden in cushions or clothing.⁸¹

After 1934, Osip and Nadezhda were naturally far more conscious of the risk that his work would be seized by the police and either destroyed or used as evidence to support further punitive proceedings. Accordingly, they saved his work by either memorizing it or by scattering copies among relatives or close friends who could be trusted to keep them hidden. Nadezhda later described how she saved Osip's poems:

As to M.'s manuscripts, we rescued a small number of drafts from various years. After this [1934 arrest] we never kept them in the apartment again. I took some of them out to Voronezh in small batches in order to establish the texts in final form and to compile lists of the unpublished items. I gradually got this done together with M. himself, who had now changed his attitude toward manuscripts and drafts. Previously he had no time at all for them and was always angry when, instead of destroying them, I threw them into the old yellow trunk that had belonged to my mother. But after the search of our apartment and his arrest, he understood that it was easier to save a manuscript than a man, and he no longer relied on his memory, which, as he knew, would perish with him. Some of these manuscripts have survived to the present day, but the bulk of them disappeared at the time of his two arrests It is a miracle that a few witnesses and a handful of manuscripts have survived from those times.⁸²

During the next two years while living in Voronezh, Mandelstam wrote some 90 poems, filling three more school exercise "notebooks." The first group ("First Voronezh Notebook") consists of 22 poems written from April to August 1935. The "Second Voronezh Notebook" consists of about 40 "written down" in the fall of 1936 and beginning of 1937. The final, "Third Voronezh Notebook" consists of 22 poems and covers the period March to May 16, 1937, when the Voronezh exile came to an end. Nadezhda said that, as with some earlier poems, he wrote these in groups with the entire group having a single "flow." The poems in the "Third Voronezh Notebook" were thus "a new departure" from those in the second.⁸³

During that last year in Voronezh, Mandelstam's "isolation was really complete." Nadezhda's brother provided their rent money as they could not earn anything. "People turned away from us in the street and pretended not to recognize us. ... Everything suggested that the end was near, and M. was trying to take full advantage of his remaining days... He drove himself

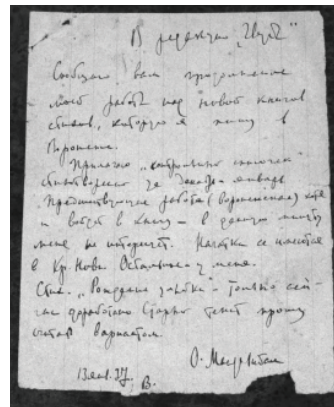
so hard during the whole of that year that he became even more painfully short of breath: his pulse was irregular and his lips were blue. He generally had his attacks of angina on the street..."⁸⁴

Mandelstam had not given up hope of publication in one of Russia's literary magazines. Nadezhda took the group of poems gathered in the "First Voronezh Notebook" to Fadeyev, editor of *Krasnaya Nov*; but the editor just scanned them and handed them back.⁸⁵ Osip also mailed copies of some of his poems to literary magazines in Moscow. During late 1936 and early 1937 he wrote several letters to Nikolai Tikhonov, an editor of the Leningrad journal *Zvesda* ("Star"). His letters were almost always ignored, though in one case he received an answer – a "stilted reply" disapproving pacifism.⁸⁶

I have very few literary letters or manuscripts in my "book collection," but one of the few exceptions, which I acquired as part of a larger collection, is one of the handwritten letters Mandelstam sent from Voronezh to Tikhonov at *Zvesda*. He wrote this particular letter on January 13, 1937 (my translation):

I write to tell you about the continuation of my work on a new book of poetry, which I am writing in Voronezh. I attach a control list of poetry from December to January. My preceding work (written in Voronezh) although I include it in the book, at the present time does not interest me. Drafts are in "Kr[asnaya] Nov." [a literary magazine.] The remainder are with me. The poem "Birth of a Smile" is only now just completed. The old text I will send for you to consider as a variant.
O. Mandelstam.

Osip's letter refers to the poems in the so called "Second Voronezh Notebook" – which included those written in late 1936 and early 1937 – and confirms Nadezhda's judgment that these were separate and distinct from those written earlier (the group which Mandelstam wrote "at the present time does not interest me"). "The Birth of a Smile," referred to in the letter, is included in Mandelstam's published works as part of the "Second Voronezh Notebook," which contains a note that it was written between



Mandelstam's letter to the Editor of *Zvesda*, Tikhonov, January 13, 1937, telling him about his new Voronezh poems.

December 9, 1936, and January 17, 1937. His letter to the editor on January 13, 1937, referred to it as “only just now completed.”

Osip’s letter to Tikhonov was passed on to a well known specialist in 20th Century Russian literature, S. Poliakova, who in turn sold it to a book dealer. It then passed through other hands on its way to mine. The letter—along with four others to Tikhonov from the same period—was published in *Glagol*, a Russian-language literary magazine published in Ann Arbor in 1981.⁸⁷

One of Osip’s other letters to Tikhonov underscores the desperate condition in which Mandelstam found himself. He wrote on March 6, 1937 (my translation):

To keep secret from you my position would be bad and unnatural. All of my attempts and those of my wife to arrange the means of living without private support have led to nothing. Neither I nor my wife can receive any kind of work. In addition, I, as before, am sick and have no ability to work. When I wrote you about the extreme undesirability of private support, I hoped to put the matter on another plane. I haven’t ceased to hope this up to now.

There is no reason to live. I even have almost no simple acquaintances here in Voronezh. Absolute need forces me to turn to people I do not know, which is completely intolerable and useless. All local institutions are closed to me, except the hospital but only from the moment when I finally collapse. That moment hasn’t yet arrived: I continue on my feet, and from time to time I write poetry and live on the fortuitous help of friends...

This time I ask you personally to help me with money. With great joy I will repay you this debt if sometime my new book of poems will be accepted for publication.⁸⁸

Unfortunately, the editor either could not or would not help. If he had published Osip’s poems, it might have meant his own life.

The Voronezh poems – Mandelstam’s “passport into immortality” – did not appear in a book until the two-volume collection of his works, edited by Professors Struve and Filipoff, appeared in the United States in 1965. (The collection was later expanded to four volumes.)

How did Mandelstam's poems in the three Voronezh Notebooks manage to survive? Nadezhda wrote that,

During the whole of our three years in Voronezh, I made copies of everything and distributed them to such people as I could find, but apart from my brother Evgeni (who in any case kept nothing at his own home) I had nobody I could rely on to take them. Not, that is, until Sergei Borisovich Rudakov turned up.⁸⁹

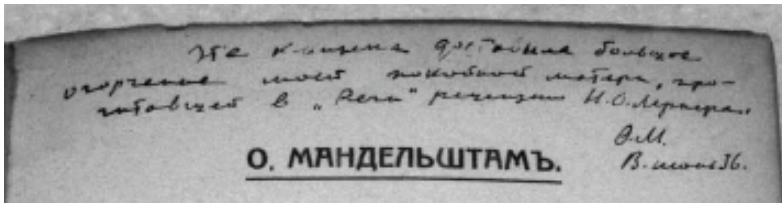
Sergei Rudakov was a young poet and the son of a Tsarist general. His father and elder brother had been shot in the early 1920's, and he had been expelled from Leningrad. Rudakov and Mandelstam had met in Voronezh in early April 1935, and Rudakov had gone with Mandelstam to the violin recital that prompted him to start writing poems again.⁹⁰ Nadezhda wrote that Rudakov came to them for his meals. He helped them copy poems they wanted to save into a notebook. Nadezhda was not fond of him. She thought he was too arrogant, was put off by his constant grumbling, and did not like his habit of trying to tell Osip how to improve his poems.

But Osip liked Rudakov. He read poems to him, and he even dedicated one to him "Black Earth" (the second poem among those published in the First Voronezh Notebook).⁹¹ (Akhmatova also liked him enough to dedicate a poem to him in 1945 – "To the Memory of a Friend."⁹²) Nadezhda referred to him as "the young Rudakov, who in his devotion to us spent a year and a half in exile with us in Voronezh, where we shared every scrap of bread with him because he had no way of earning a living there."⁹³ Rudakov hoped to write a book on Mandelstam:⁹⁴ and Osip evidently thought that Rudakov might be a possible editor for a future edition of his collected works. Together they filled several notebooks of materials including Mandelstam's own explanations (the "key") to his poems. Nadezhda wrote that they became so close that, "I gave him original copies of all M.'s most important work, and Akhmatova let him have the whole of Gumilev's archive ..."⁹⁵

Later, Nadezhda and Akhmatova turned against Rudakov partly because his letters revealed an over-developed ego and partly because of their inability to recover the papers they had entrusted to him. The Mandelstams' friend Emma Gerstein agreed that Rudakov was arrogant but gave him more credit: "It was Rudakov with his 'crazy talk,' his 'resounding nonsense,' and his excessive self-regard who stimulated Mandelstam to start writing

poetry again.” In April 1935, after his long silence and shortly after Rudakov joined them in Voronezh.⁹⁶ It is thus entirely possible – no one can say for sure – that if it had not been for Rudakov, the great poems of the “Voronezh Notebooks” would not have been written.

Before Rudakov went back to Petersburg in early July 1936, Mandelstam gave him a copy of the first edition of his first book *Kamen*. It was likely Osip’s personal copy, the only copy of the first edition Mandelstam retained, because no other copies were later found in the remains of his library.⁹⁷ In the copy of *Kamen* Mandelstam gave to Rudakov, he wrote as follows (my translation): “This little book caused great distress to my deceased mother when she read N.O. Lerner’s review of it in *Rech*. O.M. 13 [June or July] ‘36.”⁹⁸



Title page of *Kamen*, with Mandelstam’s presentation to his friend Sergei Rudakov. Mandelstam wrote that, “This little book caused great distress to my deceased mother when she read [the] Lerner ... review of it.”

Rech (“Speech”) was a Petersburg newspaper published during the 1910’s. Lerner was a well-known literary critic – the researcher of the life and works of Pushkin. The review Mandelstam referred to was actually Lerner’s review of the second edition of *Kamen*. It has been reprinted in an academic edition of *Kamen*. Lerner’s review says of Mandelstam’s work: “He writes the same way it seems to us that young authors write – hundreds of young men and women, whose names and pseudonyms leap out and fall without a trace, like bubbles in the rain, in countless journals, newspapers and almanacs. His mood is weak, accidental, disorganized. Nowhere does he rise to real inspiration, and everything he says is the fruit of ‘irritation of captive thoughts’ ...” It is not surprising that Osip’s mother was distressed at the time, or that Lerner’s review stuck in Mandelstam’s memory.

Rudakov was later arrested and sent to the camps. Upon his release, he was sent to the front and died in January 1944. Afterwards, Rudakov’s widow told both Nadezhda and Akhmatova that their archives were safe and in order.⁹⁹ But when Nadezhda tried to recover the manuscripts from Rudakov’s widow, “she did not return them to us.” Akhmatova had the

same unhappy experience.¹⁰⁰ Nadezhda had not given Rudakov everything because she believed that the papers should be dispersed. But she had “lost several poems altogether – nearly all the Voronezh rough drafts and many copies of *Tristia* in M.’s own hand.”¹⁰¹

Yet it is not clear how many final texts of Mandelstam’s were irretrievably lost. Nadezhda had managed to memorize virtually everything: “Until 1956 I could remember everything by heart – both prose and verse. In order not to forget it, I had to repeat a little to myself each day. I did this while I thought I still had a good while to go on living. But time is getting on now.”¹⁰² Also, Nadezhda later told her friend Anna Gerstein that Nadezhda had not given anything of value to Rudakov – that “I’ve got them all.”¹⁰³

Whether or not any poems were irretrievably lost. Nadezhda was understandably bitter. She referred to Rudakov’s widow (known as Rudakova-Finkelstein) as having “stolen” her papers, and suspected her of having sold some of Gumilev’s papers through middlemen.¹⁰⁴ She even suspected that the widow was simply carrying out Rudakov’s own intentions. She was probably right about the sale of papers. But Gerstein thought Nadezhda and Akhmatova overdid it in believing Rudakov guilty of theft.¹⁰⁵

Apart from sales of papers, it appears that many of Mandelstam’s papers were simply lost or thrown away. Rudakov’s widow was arrested after the war in connection with the “Doctors’ plot” against Stalin. During the arrest some of the papers may have been confiscated by the authorities.¹⁰⁶ Also, the widow probably burned a significant chunk of the archive.¹⁰⁷ After the widow died, at least one Russian book dealer contacted her family to ask about buying any remaining books or literary papers. He was told that the family threw away the “papers” after her death. The “key” to Mandelstam’s poems is among the items that were lost.

Rudakov’s widow’s daughter did keep the letters Rudakov wrote from Voronezh, and transferred them to the Pushkin House manuscript collection in Petersburg. These cast a light on the Mandelstam’s last years of life there. The letters were published by the Russian Academy of Science, Institute of Russian Literature, in 1997. *Annual of Manuscript Department of Pushkin House* for 1993, at 7 et seq. Large sections of the letters appear in English translation in Gerstein’s *Moscow Memoirs*.

In mid-January 1937 while he was still in Voronezh, Osip, in a last attempt to save their lives, composed an ode of adulation to Stalin. (Akhmatova did the same thing in 1950 in an attempt to protect her son, Lev, who was in ef-

fect being held hostage in a Soviet prison camp.) Nadezhda later described how Osip composed his "Ode:" how he changed his writing habits and composed it with paper and pencil, rather than in his head. Osip's effort was an artistic failure. He told Akhmatova that he "was ill when I wrote it."¹⁰⁸ But Nadezhda thought the "Ode" had the practical effect of saving her life: "it was counted in a widow's favor if her husband had made his submission even though it wasn't accepted. M. knew this. By surviving I was able to save his poetry, which would otherwise have come down only in the garbled copies circulating in 1937."¹⁰⁹

When they later left Voronezh, Osip asked a friend to destroy the "Ode." But Nadezhda opposed it so the poem survived. Indeed, after his return from Voronezh, Osip gave readings of it frequently no doubt to curry favor. The "Ode" was first published in a journal in 1975, and now appears in Vol. IV of the *Collected Works*.¹¹⁰

At about the same time as he struggled with his "Ode" to Stalin, Mandelstam wrote one of his great works, "Poem On an Unknown Soldier." It confirms that the problem with the Stalin "Ode" was the subject matter, not the artistic talent of the author.

In May 1937 Osip's term of internal exile at Voronezh came to an end, and he was permitted to go back to Moscow. One of his acquaintances gave him a ride around Moscow in a new motor car ¹¹¹ and Osip fretted about where they would live. But it turned out they could not get a residence permit for Moscow because Osip was a "convicted person." Officials would not meet with him, an ominous sign. He was under close surveillance. Finally his health broke.

The authorities allowed him to leave Moscow. He and Nadezhda lived for a while in a village called Savelovo on the Volga. They managed to take the train to Petersburg for what turned out to be a last visit with family and friends there. Osip, who was sick and had almost nothing, was told that his aging father had no warm clothing. "Osip took off the sweater he was wearing under his jacket, so that it would be given to his father."¹¹²

In the spring of 1938 during the height of the "Terror," the head of the government-controlled Literary Fund, Vladimir Stavsky, permitted Osip and Nadezhda to take a two-month vacation in a rest home at Samatikha, not far from Moscow. On the surface, it seemed a small blessing. In fact it was one of the last steps toward extermination. Because of the opening of

the Kremlin's previously-secret files, we now know that a couple of months earlier Stavsky had written to Yezhov, the new head of the secret police:

Part of the literary world is very nervously discussing the problem of Osip Mandelstam.

As everyone knows, Osip Mandelstam was exiled to Voronezh 3-4 years ago for obscene libelous verse and anti-Soviet agitation. Now his term of exile has ended

It is not simply, or even primarily, a problem of the author himself, a writer of obscene, libelous verse about the leadership of the Party and of all the Soviet people. It is a question of the attitude of a group of notable Soviet writers to Mandelstam. I am writing to you, Nikolay Ivanovich, to seek your help Once again let me request you to help resolve the problem of Osip Mandelstam. ¹¹³

In other words, "You decide ... but give us clearance to get rid of him." Stavsky attached a critical "review" of Mandelstam's recent poetry. The reviewer found acceptable only the "Ode to Stalin," which had "some good lines" and "strong feeling" but which, overall, was worse than its individual lines.¹¹⁴

Yezhov received Stavsky's letter in mid April 1938. He evidently discussed it with Stalin and then handed the matter on to his subordinates.¹¹⁵ His subordinates put together a report to "paper" the conclusion that had already been reached:

After he had completed his term of exile Mandelstam turned up in Moscow and tried to play on public opinion by a demonstrative display of his "impoverished position" and ill health. Anti-Soviet elements among writers and critics used Mandelstam for their hostile agitation, making of him a figure of suffering and organizing collections of money for him among writers. Mandelstam himself goes begging around writers' flats.

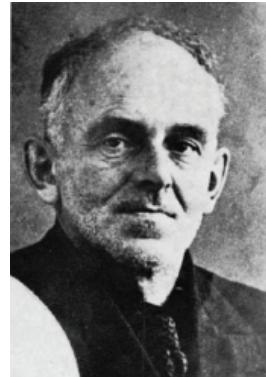
According to available information, Mandelstam has kept his anti-Soviet views to the present. As a result of his psychological imbalance he is capable of aggressive acts.

The arrest warrant was signed on April 28, 1938. Bukharin could no longer help; he had been executed during the "Terror" less than two months earlier.

On May 2 two uniformed agents and a doctor came to the rest home and took Osip away. There was no search. The agents simply dumped the contents of his suitcase into a bag. By now, Osip's papers had ceased to have any relevance to the authorities. Nadezhda hurried back to Moscow to retrieve "the basket full of manuscripts" they had left with a friend. "If I had delayed for a few more days, the contents of the basket would have been thrown into a sack ... and I myself would have been taken away in a Black Maria ... But then what would have happened to M.'s poetry?"¹¹⁶

Osip was again taken to the Lubyanka. Two weeks later, a single deposition was taken to conclude the formalities. Osip was charged with anti-Soviet agitation and sentenced in early August to five years in a labor camp.¹¹⁷ It was, in effect, a death sentence. Mandelstam was sent to Kolyma in Siberia. From the time of his arrest in May until December, nothing was heard of him. Then in mid-December 1938 his brother received his last letter, written in Vladivostok. He wrote, "My health is very poor. I am emaciated in the extreme, I've become very thin, almost unrecognizable, but send clothes, food and money though I don't know if there's any point."

Nadezhda sent him food parcels and money she scraped together. But on February 5, 1939, the money was returned, "Because of the death of the addressee." The NKVD file contains a note that Osip had died December 27, 1938 at a place near Vladivostok. His death certificate said he died of "heart failure." Nadezhda observed dryly: "This is as much as to say that he died because he died: what is death but heart failure?" The location of his burial, if he had one, is not known. His body was probably thrown into a common grave along with those of the others.¹¹⁸



Mandelstam in the late 1930's

Two decades later, after Stalin's death and Khrushchev's ascendancy, Mandelstam was cleared of the 1938 charges. Nadezhda was given 5000 rubles, which she divided among the people who had helped them in 1937 in Voronezh.

During the years after 1938, Nadezhda occasionally heard from people who had been in the Vladivostok transit camp. One of the ex-prisoners told of having been invited to a small loft in the barracks to hear poetry read:

The loft was lit by a candle. In the middle stood a barrel on which there was an opened can of food and some white bread. For the starving camp this was an unheard-of luxury. People lived on thin soup of which there was never enough – what they got for their morning meal would not have filled a glass.

Sitting with the criminals was a man with a gray stubble of beard, wearing a yellow leather coat. He was reciting verse which L. recognized. It was Mandelstam. The criminals offered him bread and the canned stuff, and he calmly helped himself and ate. Evidently he was only afraid to eat food given him by his jailers. He was listened to in complete silence and sometimes asked to repeat a poem.¹¹⁹

Years later, on the outskirts of Vladivostok where the old transit camp used to be, a street was renamed “Mandelstam Street.” Maybe the name was taken from one of the poems he wrote in Voronezh:

*What street is this?
Mandelstam Street.
What a devil of a name!
However you turn it
It sounds crooked, not straight.
There was little of the straight line in him,
His morals were not lily-white
And so this street,
Or rather this pit,
Is named after
This Mandelstam.*

* * *

NOTES

- ¹ Akhmatova, *My Half Century*, p. 107.
- ² Berlin, “A Note On Literature and the Arts in the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic in the Closing Months of 1945.”
- ³ Joseph Brodsky, *Less Than One, Selected Essays*, New York, 1986, p. 123, 145.
- ⁴ *Id.*, p. 130.
- ⁵ *Id.*, p. 134.

⁶ For details on Mandelstam's life, I rely primarily on his autobiographical sketches, *The Noise of Time*, Princeton, 1965 (ed. Clarence Brown) and the memoirs of his wife, Nadezhda Mandelstam, *Hope Against Hope* (London, 1971) and *Hope Abandoned* (London, 1974). No complete biography of Mandelstam has yet appeared in the West. An early biography is Clarence Brown's *Mandelstam*, Cambridge, 1973. Brown did more than any other Western scholar to establish Mandelstam's reputation. A fine shorter but more recent sketch of Mandelstam was contributed by Prof. Omry Ronen to *European Writers, The Twentieth Century*, ed. Stade, Vol 10, NY, 1990, 1619-1651. Anna Akhmatova wrote a brief memoir of Mandelstam, which appears in Akhmatova, *My Half Century*, Evanston, 1992, p. 84 et seq. And I have struggled through one Russian biography, by Oleg Lekmanov, *Zhis' Osipa Mandel'shtama*, ("Life of Osip Mandelstam") Petersburg, 2003. The best collection of Mandelstam's work, *Sobranie Sochinenii* ("Collected Works"), edited by Professors Struve and Filipoff, published by the Inter-Language Literary Associates from 1964 to 1969, likewise contains correspondence and much other information of biographical and bibliographic value. Emma Gerstein's *Moscow Memoirs, Memories of Anna Akhmatova, Osip Mandelstam, and Literary Russia under Russia*, New York, 2004, is also well worth reading, though it is critical of Mandelstam and Akhmatova, and also of Nadezhda Mandelstam and her memoirs.

⁷ Lekmanov, p. 13.

⁸ Quoted in Brown, p. 21.

⁹ Brown, p. 21.

¹⁰ *Id.*, p. 46.

¹¹ Mandelstam, *Noise of Time*, Penguin, 1993, p. 78-9; see *Hope Against Hope*, p. 243.

¹² Quoted in Brown, p. 25; see also Lekmanov, p. 24.

¹³ Mandelstam, *Noise of Time*, p. 115.

¹⁴ Brown, p. 30.

¹⁵ Lekmanov, p. 23.

¹⁶ *Id.*, p. 25.

¹⁷ Mirsky, *Contemporary Russian Literature*, London, 1926, p. 206.

- ¹⁸ Lekmanov, p. 29-30.
- ¹⁹ Akhmatova. *My Half Century*, p. 85.
- ²⁰ Lekmanov, p. 30.
- ²¹ June 20, 1909.
- ²² Brown, p. 37.
- ²³ Lekmanov, p. 39.
- ²⁴ *Id.*, p. 64.
- ²⁵ Brown, p. 44.
- ²⁶ Lekmanov, p. 30-31.
- ²⁷ "A Trap for Judges."
- ²⁸ Lekmanov, p. 42, 45.
- ²⁹ *Id.*, p. 51.
- ³⁰ Akhmatova, *My Half Century*, p. 86.
- ³¹ Mandelstam, *Noise of Time*, p. 107.
- ³² Lekmanov, p. 51.
- ³³ A. A. Morozov, "Pic'ma O.E. Mandel'stama V. I. Ivanovu," in *Zapiski Otdela Rukopisei*, Izdatel'stvo Kniga, Moskva, 1973, p. 261. Morozov points out that Mandelstam gave Ivanov a second copy of his book, and that relations between the two continued to be warm and mutually respectful.
- ³⁴ Lekmanov, p. 53.
- ³⁵ Quoted in Brown, p. 58.
- ³⁶ Quoted in Brown, p. 58.
- ³⁷ Lekmanov, p. 67.
- ³⁸ *Id.*, p. 60.
- ³⁹ Brown, p. 67.
- ⁴⁰ Lekmanov, p. 80; Akhmatova, p. 90.
- ⁴¹ Tsvetaeva Memoir—*Story of One Dedication; City of Alexandrov*.
- ⁴² Lekmanov, p. 73.
- ⁴³ *Hope Against Hope*, p. 362.
- ⁴⁴ Lekmanov, p. 86, 99.

- ⁴⁵ *Id.*, p. 93.
- ⁴⁶ *Hope Against Hope*, p. 192
- ⁴⁷ Lekmanov, p. 100.
- ⁴⁸ Brown, p. 220.
- ⁴⁹ Lekmanov, p. 102.
- ⁵⁰ *Hope Against Hope*, p. 190.
- ⁵¹ Brown, p. 220; Lekmanov, p. 102.
- ⁵² Brown, p. 111.
- ⁵³ *Hope Against Hope*, p. 138.
- ⁵⁴ Lekmanov, p. 108, 116.
- ⁵⁵ Brown, p. 90.
- ⁵⁶ See Vol. III, 1969 at 426-427
- ⁵⁷ *Hope Against Hope*, p. 138.
- ⁵⁸ *Id.*, p. 162.
- ⁵⁹ Lekmanov, p. 123.
- ⁶⁰ Mandelstam, *The Noise of Time*, ed. Brown, 1965, p. 37.
- ⁶¹ *Id.*, p. 50-51.
- ⁶² Reprinted in *Noise of Time*, Penguin, p. 181.
- ⁶³ Mandelstam, *The Moscow Notebooks*, ed. McKane, 1991, p. 10-11.
- ⁶⁴ *Hope Against Hope*, p. 92.
- ⁶⁵ *Id.*, p. 160.
- ⁶⁶ *Id.*, 13.
- ⁶⁷ Lekmanov, p. 176.
- ⁶⁸ Shentalinsky, p. 180.
- ⁶⁹ *Hope Against Hope*, at 76-77.
- ⁷⁰ *My Half Century*, p. 103.
- ⁷¹ Shentalinsky, p. 183; *Hope Against Hope*, p. 32.
- ⁷² Shentalinsky, p. 182; *Hope Against Hope*, p. 59.
- ⁷³ *My Half Century*, p. 102.
- ⁷⁴ *Hope Against Hope.*, p. 112.

- ⁷⁵ Lekmanov, p. 180.
- ⁷⁶ *Hope Against Hope*, p. 146.
- ⁷⁷ *Id.*, p. 139.
- ⁷⁸ Quoted in Gerstein, p. 121.
- ⁷⁹ Mandelstam, *The Voronezh Notebooks*, ed. McKane, quoted in introduction, p. 12.
- ⁸⁰ *Hope Against Hope*, p. 270.
- ⁸¹ *Id.*, p. 271.
- ⁸² *Id.*, p. 20-21.
- ⁸³ *Id.*, p. 191.
- ⁸⁴ *Id.*, p. 182-183.
- ⁸⁵ *Id.*, p. 152.
- ⁸⁶ *Id.*, p. 183-84.
- ⁸⁷ No. 3, p. 292. I am indebted to Prof. Omri Ronen of the University of Michigan for referring me to this journal.
- ⁸⁸ *Glagol* No. 3, p. 293-294.
- ⁸⁹ *Hope Against Hope*, p. 271.
- ⁹⁰ *Supra*, footnote 78.
- ⁹¹ P. 101
- ⁹² *My Half-Century*, p. 376.
- ⁹³ *Hope Against Hope*, p. 9.
- ⁹⁴ Lekmanov, p. 185. ⁹⁵ *Id.*, p. 273. See Gerstein, *Moscow Memoirs*, p. 94, 117, et seq.
- ⁹⁶ Gerstein, p. 111.
- ⁹⁷ Jurij Frejdin, "Ostatok Knig: Biblioteka O.E.Mandel'stama" — *Slovo i Syd'ba: Osip Mandelstam: Issledovaniya I Materiali*, Moskva: Nayka, 1991, c. 231-239. Professor Thomas Langerak, who kindly referred me to this article, points out that "The first edition of *Stone* is not mentioned, so Mandelstam probably gave Rudakov his last copy." (This is from a letter to the author, May 3, 2005.) If so, the copy has special interest because it would have been one Mandelstam kept during the more than two decades since it first appeared in 1913.

- ⁹⁸ The text of the inscription was published in the “Literaturnye Pamiatniki” edition of *Kamen’*, Leningrad: Nauka, 1990, note on p.354. Again, my thanks to Professor Omri Ronen for the reference.
- ⁹⁹ Gerstein, p. 96.
- ¹⁰⁰ *Hope Against Hope*, p. 273.
- ¹⁰¹ *Id.*, p. 275.
- ¹⁰² *Id.*, p. 276.
- ¹⁰³ Gerstein, p. 103.
- ¹⁰⁴ *Id.* at 9, 274.
- ¹⁰⁵ *Id.*, p. 99-100, 115.
- ¹⁰⁶ *Id.*, p. 101.
- ¹⁰⁷ *Id.*, p. 117; *Pushkin House Annual*, p. 11.
- ¹⁰⁸ *My Half-Century*, p. 101.
- ¹⁰⁹ *Hope Against Hope*, p. 198-203.
- ¹¹⁰ YMCA Press, 1981, p. 23.
- ¹¹¹ *Hope Against Hope*, p. 277.
- ¹¹² *My Half Century*, p. 108.
- ¹¹³ Shentalinsky, p. 186.
- ¹¹⁴ See Lekmanov, p. 209.
- ¹¹⁵ *Id.*, p. 188.
- ¹¹⁶ *Hope Against Hope*, p. 361-363.
- ¹¹⁷ Lekmanov, p. 211-212.
- ¹¹⁸ *Hope Against Hope*, p. 377, 383.
- ¹¹⁹ *Id.*, p. 393.