

HOPE AGAINST HOPE: A MEMOIR. By *Nadezhda Mandelstam*. Translated by *Max Hayward*. Introduction by *Clarence Brown*. New York: Atheneum, 1970. xvi, 432 pp. \$10.00.

VOSPOMINANIYA. By *Nadezhda Mandelstam*. New York: Chekhov Publishing Corp., 1970. 432 pp. \$7.00, paper.

Nadezhda Iakovlevna is the most reliable witness of both the oppressive Stalin era and the life and work of her husband, Osip Mandelstam, with whom she courageously shared all torments, safely preserving his manuscripts and interpreting all he has written or said with the deep insight of a loving heart and a sharp mind.

Mandelstam, N.I. says, "had no taste for martyrdom." Nevertheless, he, the easygoing childlike poet, was perhaps the only one in Russia who dared to criticize openly the bloodthirsty dictator: he wrote in 1933 a biting poem on Stalin ("his fingers are fat as grubs, / and the words, final as lead weights, fall from his lips"). This poem he was even bold enough to read and allow to be copied by his listeners. Instead of being shot immediately, Mandelstam was condemned to live a tormented life for four years more until he died of exhaustion in a Vladivostok concentration camp, probably on December 27, 1938. "Mandelstam stubbornly maintained that if they [the Bolsheviks] killed people for poetry, then they must fear and respect it—in other words, that it too was a power in the land," recalls N.I. The poet was indeed right: *they* had killed him out of a respect for his poetry.

Osip Emilievich was not a citizen-poet in the Nekrasovian sense. For a long time he was called a poets' poet whom only connoisseurs would be able to understand and appreciate. In the twenties he was even on the point of accepting the Soviet regime—"except the death penalty," says N.I. But in the thirties when the vacillating Russian intelligentsia, and the Russian people too, were hypnotized and capitulated, Mandelstam still preserved his inner freedom. He could not remain silent, and signed his death warrant—his poem on Stalin.

Mandelstam was prevented from publishing even before that, but still his poems were heard in the terror-stricken country, while in a death cell an unknown condemned man scratched on the wall two lines of his: "Am I real / and will death really come?"

Mandelstam has defined poetry as a "blissful senseless word" (*blazhennoe bessmyslennoe slovo*) which, according to his own and also N.I.'s comments, "reveals the Creator through his creation, God through man." He was a religious man and poet, although he left Judaism and did not formally become a Christian. As N.I. states, "he was rather afraid of the Old Testament God and his awesome totalitarian power. He used to say (and later I found the same idea in Berdiaev) that, with its doctrine of the Trinity, Christianity had overcome the undivided power of the Jewish God. Undivided power was, of course, something of which we were very afraid."

As we know from the fragments of Mandelstam's essay on Pushkin and Skriabin (preserved and well analyzed by N.I.), Christian art was for him a free joyous communication with God (*radostnoe bogoobshchenie*) in a world already redeemed by Christ's death and resurrection, and he was right in regarding himself as the last Christian-Hellenic poet of Russia.

Mandelstam believed that art is joy, and life should be joy too, a free imitation of Christ. Therefore, as N.I. points out so well, he did not share Blok's pessimism concerning the end of humanism. He also said that Spengler's pessimistic book, *The Decline of the West*, is not applicable to Christian culture, which he defined

as a testing ground for both good and evil. In this respect Mandelshtam was close to Berdiaev. Nevertheless he did not share the skepticism of Berdiaev, who could not sense the divine and eternal as realized here, in the realm of time, in history. Actually Berdiaev had not overcome all Manichean temptations, and therefore distrusted all that was physical and not purely spiritual, and longed for a metaphysical eternity *there*. Rather, as N.I. says, Mandelshtam was able to experience "its fullness and density" *here*: every second of time may be equivalent to eternity itself, both in life and art. In this respect Mandelshtam coincides with George Fedotov, whose books he never read.

In the terrible thirties Mandelshtam could not remain a silent witness to the horrors of collectivization, and of the obvious triumph of evil incorporated in Stalin and his jailers. He suffered from hallucinations and was tormented by a mania of persecution; he even tried to commit suicide. Nevertheless this fragile heartsick man somehow preserved a childlike cheerfulness and his creative powers too. Death and doom were the main topics of his poems written in Voronezh exile, and still his "moving lips" whispered verses in praise of creation and its creator. This "divine child" (as Marina Tsvetaeva called him) transformed darkness into light and remained a poet during the prolonged invitation to a beheading.

As many of us feel now, the blissful sounds of Mandelshtam's poetry may be compared only with those of Pushkin—and Batiushkov, whom I consider the real predecessor of both Pushkin and Mandelshtam. They both learned much from this greatest Russian "minor" poet, whom Mandelshtam admired:

He, tongue-tied, brought with himself
 Our torments and our splendence,
 The noise of poetry and the brotherhood's bells,
 And the harmonious flow of tears.
 (Nashe muchen'e i nashe bogatstvo,
 Kosnoiazychnyi, s soboi on prines,
 Shum stikhotvorstva i kolokol bratstva
 I garmonicheskii proliven' slez.)

Mandelshtam, "Batiushkov"

Mandelshtam, by a miracle, turned despair into a joyous harmony, and he paid for it with his blood and body indeed. Probably he was Stalin's most innocent and precious victim.

N.I., the frail old great lady with an iron will, avoids all overstatements in her penetrating report, where the very facts sometimes speak louder than even Solzhenitsyn's or Shalamov's exposure and accusations of the Stalin era, which she calls an "Assyrian" period in Russian history. I believe that one example from her memoirs is enough to prove the Kafka-like absurdity of this epoch. A certain old man, "frantic with hunger," was not able to get a job as a night watchman because by accident his name Mitrofan coincided with that of St. Mitrofan cathedral in Voronezh, and it was therefore thought that he must have something to do with the church (imagine the jobless Pietros and Nicolases in a Stalinist Rome or Bari). The old man hanged himself.

Like Osip Emilievich, Nadezhda Iakovlevna did not lose her optimism about a *rebirth* in Russia: "I still think the general outlook is bright," she says, but on the condition that we reject a boundless confidence in the human intellect, "which inspired the Bolsheviks and, I add, the whole of our dehumanized world." She also says: "Russia once saved the Christian culture of Europe from the Tartars, and in

the past fifty years, by taking the brunt on herself, she has saved Europe again—this time from rationalism and the will to evil that goes with it. The sacrifice of human life was enormous. How can I believe it was in vain?"

Nadezhda Iakovlevna's recollections are translated well by Max Hayward. Clarence Brown's introduction is illuminating enough, and his appropriate citation from Yeats's "Lapis Lazuli" may be applied to both of the Mandelshtams:

They know that Hamlet and Lear are gay;
Gaiety transfiguring all that dread.

.....
All things fall and are built again,
And those that build them again are gay.

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OSTANOVKA V PUSTYNE: STIKHOTVORENIIA I POEMY. By *Iosif Brodsky*. New York: Izdatel'stvo Imeni Chekhova, 1970. 228 pp. \$5.00, paper.

Brodsky's first book of poems appeared in New York in 1965. The present book, his second, is the first title of the Chekhov Press redivivus (under different management and a different English name, but with the identical Russian name, to keep future bibliographers on their toes). It contains seventy-one poems, of which twenty-three appeared, occasionally in unsatisfactory form, in the earlier version. The first title of a new house, the second (traditionally crucial) collection of a poet who had at the time just turned thirty (an even more fateful anniversary nowadays than it used to be)—it would seem a momentous conjunction of occasions, calling for special attention.

All concerned deserve congratulations. And since he has been rather abused in the émigré press, I specifically include the anonymous "N.N.," author of the eccentric introduction, who, if he is an *enthusiast*, is at least an enthusiast for poetry rather than the cold war.

Brodsky's finest work is in the long poem (for want of a more precise term; the divisions of the book blur what is left of such genre distinctions as *elegia* and *poema*) and in the translations. The longest and most ambitious work, *Gorbunov i Gorchakov* (1965–68), is also the best. Brodsky's headlong genius is rather like Khlebnikov's in requiring the scope of a large work: his unit is not the line, as "N.N." rightly observes, but a kind of syntactic period. These fourteen cantos each contain one hundred iambic pentameters, usually in ten-line stanzas with only two alternating rhymes. It is exclusively dialogue (between the two eponymous heroes, for the most part, though there are other voices), and the speeches are not attributed by any of the normal typographic devices to specific speakers. In order to keep the voices of this dizzying stichomythia apart in your mind, you must plunge in and, having determined who is who, read forward at the frenetic and urgent pace that is so characteristic of Brodsky. But they coalesce anyway, as they should, for we are dealing with another Russian geminate hero. Gorbunov, the humane, half-crazy dreamer about mushrooms and the sea (Brodsky's symbols for peace and freedom are peculiarly Russian while being very contemporary, and universal), and his tormentor, the *seksot* Gorchakov, are really two facets of one anguished consciousness. The emotional and intellectual tensions built into the form itself are reminiscent of Dostoevsky. In Canto 5 ("Song in the Third Person") Brodsky puts the phrase