



O. Mandelstam in Voronezh exile, 1936

## Mandelshtam, Osip Emilyevich

**b. Jan. 3 [Jan. 15, New Style], 1891, Warsaw, Pol., Russian Empire [now in Poland]**

**d. Dec. 27, 1938, Vtoraya Rechka, near Vladivostok, Russia, U.S.S.R. [now in Russia]**

Mandelshtam also spelled MANDELSTAM, major Russian poet, prose writer, and literary essayist. Most of his works went unpublished in the Soviet Union during the Stalin era (1929-53) and were almost unknown to generations of Russian readers until the mid-1960s.

Mandelshtam grew up in St. Petersburg in a middle class Jewish household; his father was a well-off leather merchant, who abandoned rabbinical training for a secular education in Germany; his mother was a cultivated member of the Russian Jewish intelligentsia.. After graduating from the private elite Tenishev School in 1907 and an unsuccessful attempt to join a socialist-revolutionary terrorist organization, Mandelstam traveled to France to study at the Sorbonne and later to Germany to enroll at the University of Heidelberg. After returning to Russia in 1911, he converted to Christianity (baptized by the Finnish Methodists) and, thus exempted from the Jewish quota, went on to study at the University of St. Petersburg. He left it in 1915 before receiving a degree..

His first poems appeared in the St. Petersburg journal *Apollon* ("Apollo") in 1910. In response to the early Futurist manifestoes, Mandelshtam, together with Nikolay Gumilyov, Anna Akhmatova, and Sergey Gorodetsky founded the [Acmeist](#) school of poetry, an attempt at codifying the poetic practice of the new generation of Petersburg

poets. They rejected the vague mysticism of Russian Symbolism and demanded clarity and concreteness of representation, precision of form and meaning -- combined with a broad-ranging erudition (classical antiquity, European history, especially, cultural and including art and religion). Mandelshtam summed up his poetic credo in his manifesto *Utro Akmeizma* ("The Morning of Acmeism," 1913, though not published until 1919). In 1913, he underwrites the publication of his first slim volume of verse, *Kamen* ("Stone"), to be followed by the larger volume with the same name in 1916 and 1923. The title was emblematic of the Acmeist and especially Mandelshtam's identification with the cultural essence of St. Petersburg, the classical tradition of Western European civilization and the architectural expression of its spiritual and political heritage. The first two editions of *Kamen* (1913 and 1916) established Mandelshtam as a full-fledged member of the glorious cohort of Russian poets. His subsequent collections (*Vtoraia kniga* [Book Two], 1923, and *Stikhotvoreniia* [Poems], 1928) earned him the reputation of a leading poet of his generation.

Disinclined to serve as a mouthpiece for political propaganda (unlike Vladimir Mayakovsky), Mandelshtam considered "a dialogue with his time" a moral imperative for a poet. He responded to WWI and the revolution with a series of historical-philosophical, meditative poems that are among the best and most profound in the corpus of Russian civic poetry. By temperament and conviction a supporter of the Socialist Revolutionary party, he welcomed the collapse of the old regime in 1917 and was opposed to the Bolshevik seizure of power. However, his experiences during the Civil War left little doubt that he had no place in the White movement. As a Russian poet, he felt he had to share the fate of his country and could not opt for emigration. Like many Russian intellectuals at the time (sympathizers of the Change of Landmarks movement or "fellow travelers"), he made peace with the Soviets without identifying himself wholly with Bolshevik methods or goals. During the Civil War (1918-21), Mandelshtam lived alternately in Petrograd, Kiev, the Crimea, and Georgia under a variety of regimes. In 1922, after the publication of his new volume of poetry, *Tristia*, he decided to settle in Moscow and married Nadezhda Yakovlevna Khazina, whom he had met in Kiev in 1919.

Mandelshtam's poetry, erudite, resonating with historical analogies and classical myths, set him on the outer margins of Soviet literary establishment but did not diminish his standing as a premier poet of his time both among the literary elite and the most astute readers of poetry in the Bolshevik government (Mandelshtam was patronized by Nikolay Bukharin). After *Tristia*, Mandelshtam's poetic output gradually diminished, and although some of his most significant poems were composed in 1923-24 ("Slate Ode" and "1 January 1924"), it came to a complete halt in 1925. As he was turning away from poetry, Mandelshtam produced some of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century's best memoir prose (*The Noise of Time* and *Theodosia*, 1923) and a short experimental novel (*The Egyptian Stamp*, 1928). During the 1920s, he also published a series of brilliant critical essays ("The End of the Novel," "The 19<sup>th</sup> Century," "The Badger's Hole: Alexander Blok," and others). Included in a collection *O poezii* (*On Poetry*, 1928), these essays, along with his *Conversation about Dante* (1932, published in 1967), were to have a lasting impact on Russian literary scholarship (Mikhail Bakhtin, the Formalists).

Like many of his fellow poets and writers, Mandelshtam earned his living in the 1920s by literary translation. In 1929, in the tense, politicized atmosphere of the Stalin revolution, Mandelshtam became enmeshed in a copyright scandal which further estranged him from the literary establishment. In response, Mandelshtam produced *Fourth Prose* (1930), a stream of consciousness monologue mocking the servility of Soviet writers, brutality of the cultural bureaucracy, and the absurdity of “socialist construction.” *Fourth Prose* was not published in Russia until 1989. In 1930, thanks to the Nikolay Bukharin’s still powerful patronage, Mandelshtam was commissioned to travel to Armenia to observe and record the progress of their Five-Year Plan. The result was Mandelshtam’s return to poetry (the cycle “Armenia” and subsequent “Moscow Notebooks”) and *Journey to Armenia*, a powerful example of modernist travel prose. Some of the poetry of the period, along with the *Journey*, were published in periodical press in 1932-33 and were to be the last publications in his lifetime. Cleansed of the earlier scandal, Mandelshtam settles back in Moscow as a prominent member of the writers’ community, a development facilitated by a brief thaw in cultural policy in 1932-34. However, Mandelshtam’s independence, his aversion to moral compromise, his sense of civic responsibility and the horror he felt at the repression of the peasantry set him on a collision course with the Stalinist party-state. In November 1933, Mandelshtam produced a searing epigram on Stalin which he subsequently read to many of his friends (“We live unable to sense the country under our feet”). Aware of a mounting opposition to Stalin within the party, which reached its crescendo in January 1934 at the 17<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, Mandelstam hoped that his poem would become urban folklore and broaden the base of the anti-Stalin opposition. In the poem, Stalin, “a slayer of peasants” with worm-like fingers and cock-roach mustachios, delights in wholesale torture and executions. Denounced by someone in his circle, Mandelshtam was arrested for the epigram in May 1934 and sent into exile, with Stalin’s verdict “isolate but protect.” The lenient verdict was dictated by Stalin’s desire to win over the intelligentsia to his side and to improve his image abroad, a policy in line with his staging of the First Congress of Soviet Writers (August 1934).

The stress of the arrest, imprisonment and interrogations, which forced Mandelstam to divulge the names of the friends who had heard him recite the poem, led to a protracted bout of mental illness. While in the hospital in Cherdyn’ (the Urals), Mandelstam attempted suicide by jumping out of the window but survived and was re-assigned to a more hospitable city of Voronezh where he managed to regain some of his mental balance. An exile afforded the highest “protection,” he was allowed to work in the local theater and radio station but the imposed isolation from his milieu was becoming unbearable. Mandelshtam became obsessed with the idea of redeeming his offense against Stalin and transforming himself into a new Soviet man. This Voronezh period (1934-37) is, perhaps, the most productive in Mandelshtam career as a poet, yielding three remarkable cycles, the *Voronezh Notebooks*, along with his longest ever poem, “Ode to Stalin.” In a way a culmination of the *Voronezh Notebooks*, it is at once a brilliant Pindaric panegyric to his tormentor and a Christ-like plea to the “father of all people” to be spared the Cross. Composed by a great poet, it stands as a unique monument to the mental horror of Stalinism and the tragedy of the intelligentsia’s capitulation before the violence and ideological diktat of the Stalinist regime.

In May 1937, his sentence served, Mandelshtam left Voronezh but as a former exile, was not allowed a residence permit within a 100 km radius of Moscow. Destitute, homeless, suffering from asthma and heart disease, Mandelshtam persisted in trying to rehabilitate himself, making rounds of the writers' apartments and Writers' Union's offices, reciting the "Ode," pleading for work and a return to a normal life. The poet's friends in Moscow and Leningrad took up a collection to save the Mandelshtams from starvation. In March 1938, the General Secretary of the Writer's Union, Vladimir Stavksy, denounced Mandelshtam to the head of the secret police, Nikolay Yezhov, as someone stirring up trouble in the writers' community. The denunciation included an expert review of Mandelshtam's oeuvre by a writer Peter Pavlenko who dismissed Mandelshtam as a mere versifier, with grudging praise but for a few of the "Ode's" lines. A month later, on 3 May 1938, Mandelshtam was arrested. Sentenced to five years of labor camps for anti-Soviet activity, he died in a transit camp near Vladivostok on 27 December 1938. The "Ode" remained unpublished until 1976.

Perhaps more than any other poet of his glorious generation, with the exception of Velemir Khlebnikov, Mandelshtam was distinguished by a complete commitment to his vocation as a poet-prophet, poet-martyr. Without permanent residence or steady employment but for a brief interlude in the early 1930s, he lived the life of an archetypal poet, dispersing manuscripts among his friends and relying on their memory for "archiving" his unpublished poetry. It was primarily through the efforts of his widow, who died in 1980, that little of the poetry of Osip Mandelshtam was lost; she kept his works alive during the repression by memorizing them and by collecting manuscript copies.

After Stalin's death the publication in Russian of Mandelshtam's works resumed, with the first volume of Mandelshtam's poetry coming out in 1973. But it was the early American two-volume annotated edition of Mandelshtam by Gleb Struve and Boris Filippov (1964), along with the books of memoirs by Nadezhda Mandelshtam, that brought the poet's oeuvre to the attention of the new generations of readers, scholars, and fellow poets. In Russia at the turn of the twenty first century, Mandelshtam has remained one of the most quoted poets of his day.

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