Toward a Personal Memoir of Nadezhda Iakovlevna Mandel'shtam

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In mythology, there are tales, in which the Hero sets out for distant lands to seek his fortune. He thinks he knows his goal and where he is headed. He bounces along the road jauntily, perhaps even whistling with the joy of being alive and the triumph of being an independent, fully capable adult. He may have doubts, but he conceals them, trusting to luck and bravado. Along the way, he encounters an old man or old woman, the Wise Person, who gives instructions and tasks to do, warns of perils, tells him exactly where to go, whom he will meet and what words to speak, who reveals secrets and says mysterious things. Events take on a peculiar character—whatever they had seemed to be before, they now turn out to be something else. People change form and reveal their true natures. The encounter is unexpected. The outcome is unknown. When it is over, the Hero has entered a new stage of life. The road behind has closed; he cannot turn back.

This is what happened to me, and the person I met on my path was Nadezhda Iakovlevna Mandel'shtam. The year was 1970, the place was Moscow. It was during the Brezhnev era, a dark period. After the terror of the Stalin time, there was the loosening of the 1960s, the so-called Thaw. Now there was a tightening. I, who had not experienced any of this history, and only dimly aware of what lurked in the impenetrable landscape on either side of my whistling path, met my adventure with great excitement, concealed my doubts, and followed my luck.

Now it is the twenty-first century and Nadezhda Iakovlevna has entered a new period. She has passed her 100th birthday, and many wish to understand her. What I can say is that she had a profound psychological effect on people. She was powerful, truly in the mythic sense. She was a presence one could not ignore and which I still feel. I can summon her up in a moment. All I have to do is go down the narrow tube of my memory, falling swiftly through thirty years, and I see her sitting at the end of the tube, a tiny figure at her table, with a shawl, a cigarette, and her cracked voice. She is looking at me with a look of recognition. She is saying, “Devochka, where have you been?”

To help in this record of Nadezhda Iakovlevna that we are putting together, all I can tell you is the effect she had on me, as seen through two lenses, one on each end of the thirty-year-long tube. First there is the lens of who I was in 1970, a young graduate student. Then there is the lens of who I am today. In 1970, I was almost fifty years younger than
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Nadezhda Iakovlevna. Now there is little more than ten years’ difference in my current age and her age at that time. Then I looked at the present or forward. Now, at least, I know what it is like to look backwards, to have something to look back at. So perhaps from this telescopic attempt, through my two lenses, a small piece of the mosaic will emerge that can fit into the larger picture that we are trying to paint.

I was in my twenties when I went to Moscow. My life had been a seamless progression through school, college, and graduate school, with one year off as a lab assistant to a physicist at Harvard. I came from a family that prized logic. If you had an argument and the other person said, “That is not logical,” you lost the argument. My experience of the outside world was as one big university. In that rational universe, I had techniques for dealing with the challenges that came my way. These were: to get the reading list, do the assignments, and study for the test. This approach to life had worked quite well for me so far, and had gotten me where I was. But it did not quite prepare me for what I was to encounter in the Soviet Union, where the words “That is not logical” or “That is not rational” were in general meaningless and triggered fits of hysterical laughter from the friends I made there.

My trip to Moscow in the fall of 1970 was as part of the American delegation for the U.S.-USSR exchange of scholars (known as IREX), a hallmark of the Cold War, the tiny thread, tightly controlled, of official exchange with the West that the Soviets for various reasons needed and allowed. I had passed my Ph.D. exams in Russian literature at Harvard and was starting my dissertation on the poet Marina Tsvetaeva, a contemporary of Osip Mandel'shtam, who had perished by her own hand in 1941. She was virulently hated by the Soviet regime, so, given the political chill of the time, it was mystifying that they had accepted my proposal to study there and work with her manuscripts and archives, the beginning, perhaps, of, “But that just isn’t logical.” It wasn’t.

A trip to the Soviet Union was the rite de passage for American scholars in the making. I had spent years reading the classics of Russian literature. With rigorous language training, I spoke a correct, if bookish, Russian with an accent that my amused Russian friends characterized as “American lite.” I have to confess (for the full context and truthfulness of these remarks) that as I embarked on this trip, my concerns were petty and self-centered. I had a severe case of graduate student-itis, which revolved around the questions: Did I know enough? Had I missed something so huge and basic that only an idiot wouldn’t know it? Would people notice that I was having great difficulty understanding Tsvetaeva’s poems and had not a clue as to how to go about writing my dissertation? (All of these concerns turned out to be totally irrelevant.) On the other side of my psyche, I was thrilled to be a good eleven hours’ flying time away from home, in a place where letters travelled slowly if at all, and in a country where an international call had to be ordered in the post office three days in advance. I was on my own! I was free! My great adventure had begun.

A few weeks after arriving in Moscow, I called Nadezhda Iakovlevna (naturally from a pay phone in the street, since I had been thoroughly briefed) and she invited me to come and see her. I had been given a letter of introduction from Professor Clarence Brown of Princeton that he had asked me to transmit. He was being helpful to a budding scholar, but also, with my access to the American Embassy pouch, I could be useful to him, one of his lines of
communication with Nadezhda Iakovlevna. I had been carrying the letter around with me, since I was afraid to leave it in my dormitory room at Moscow University, knowing that the rooms were regularly searched. The evening that I came, her kitchen was full of people. She only said, “I have been waiting for you,” and opened the letter. When I left that night, she said, “Call me soon.”

I called her one morning about a month later. I really hadn’t wanted to disturb a famous older person (a published writer!) who was doubtless busy and had many engagements. When she heard my voice, she became extremely upset. “Where have you been? Why didn’t you call? I’ve been worried sick about you. No one knew what happened to you. ... I couldn’t call you there” (meaning the university). I was amazed and stammered something. “If you’re not busy, come over now;” she added.

I wasn’t busy. My major accomplishment up to that time had been to get a library card for Lenin Library, apply for permission to see the Tsvetaeva archives (which I was eventually allowed to peek at a week before I left the country), and meet my “adviser” in the Russian Literature Department at Moscow University. He was a man, purple of face, beady of eye, and with a sizable girth. I had smiled my bright American smile and said I was thrilled to be in Moscow University studying the work of Marina Tsvetaeva, the great twentieth-century poet. He seemed unmoved. As a matter of fact, he looked very close to exploding. When I asked if there were any classes that he recommended I attend, he spat out his answer, “Ne nado;” or in a loose translation, “Forget about it.”

The trip to Nadezhda Iakovlevna’s apartment on the outskirts of Moscow took over an hour, with several train changes in Moscow’s palatial proletarian subway. She was alone and this was the first of many daytime visits I made, which she seemed to like, since most of those in her “circle” were young people who came at night after work. When I arrived, she continued her diatribe. “Little girl (devochka), you are so naive, don’t you know what kind of country you have found yourself in? This is a dangerous place. You must call me regularly. You have to be careful. You have to know what you are doing. They can do anything they want. Anything.” I must have looked stricken, because she changed her tone. “Never mind. Have some tea,” she said and sat me down.

She wanted to know everything I had done, whom I had seen. I already knew the basic rules of survival for one’s own safety and that of Russian friends—do not speak in any university buildings or hotels (they were all bugged); never leave one’s address book around (I kept mine strapped to my body); call only from street phones; never tell anyone whom you are going to visit, even if they knew each other; do not take notes. When I told her about my adviser in the university, she wrote down the name and said she would check him out. The next time I came, a few days later, she said, “He’s really bad. High in the KGB. Be very careful. The only vaguely human characteristic he has, apparently, is that he’s a heavy drinker and when he’s drunk, weeps profusely while reciting Pushkin. That’s probably why he is the faculty adviser for foreigners studying poetry. Ha-ha. Avoid him at all costs.” When Russians say someone drinks a lot, they are talking about a major consumption of alcohol, something our alcoholics could not even attempt, lest they become anonymous immediately. It did not escape my attention that my adviser’s being a drunk was the good news in this scenario, whereas at home that would have been the bad news.
However, I was still persistent in my Western point of view. “How can I avoid him?” I asked. “I am supposed to be working with him.” I was thinking of my advisers at home, whom I had to see regularly if I was to get dissertation credit and keep my fellowship. “Believe me, you’re the last person in the world he wants to see,” Nadezhda Iakovlevna said. “Do as I say. Besides, you are not working with him. You are working with me.”

In this way, I became part of Nadezhda Iakovlevna’s world, and went back to the university dormitory only to sleep. She became the impresario of my Russian experience. This meant coming to see her several times a week during the day and a few times in the evening. Other evenings, I would go to see her friends, people she thought I should meet or who would benefit from a connection with me as a Westerner. Every connection she made, she had to think how it would affect people.

My relationship with Nadezhda Iakovlevna existed on several levels. On the one hand, she wanted my company, especially during the day. She said I was like a kitten that had strayed into her apartment and needed a saucer of milk, or in my case, a saucer of tea. I was a nice distraction. Her nickname for me was kotenok, or kitten. Sometimes she asked me to come in the morning. She would have just thrown a shawl over her nightgown and would be drinking ink-black tea and smoking those appalling Russian cigarettes. One freezing, sleety November day, I arrived early and found her with a terrible hacking cough. A long wire from the phone was stretched about a foot off the ground across the doorway that led from the kitchen to the bathroom and bedroom. I offered to fix the wire, afraid that she would fall. “Oh, never mind,” she said. “After all these years, I lift my leg automatically, like a horse. I won’t trip over it.” “Well, then,” I said, “with that cough, at least you could stop smoking those cigarettes. It is so dangerous.” “Smoking is one of the few pleasures I have left,” she answered, “and I have no desire to extend my life even by a day.” I must have looked bewildered at this statement. “I have accomplished everything I set out to do,” she added in explanation, taking a really long drag of smoke to emphasize her point and then coughing horribly. I could only look at her, knowing what she meant, but of course not really, totally understanding it. At that moment, Nadezhda Iakovlevna and I could not have been further apart in what life had dealt us, and where we were in its continuum—I at the hopeful beginning, she clearly, and with full awareness, at the end.

Our morning talks were intimate. She wanted to know everything I was doing. I had one acquaintance whom I did not know through her, a young engineer, a Tsvetaeva enthusiast, whom I met from time to time in Pushkin Square. He told me that as an engineer he was expressly forbidden contact with foreigners, so he was quite nervous. A café or restaurant, if it could be found, would have been too exposed, so we would walk through the streets talking about Tsvetaeva’s poetry until it got too cold, then we would part and I would call him a few weeks later. Nadezhda Iakovlevna was very concerned that I was meeting someone who was unknown to her or her circle. “How do you know he is not a stukach (informer) pretending to like Tsvetaeva?” she asked, when I told her about him. “I’m sure he’s not,” I said. “He shakes like a leaf when we meet. He has no one to talk to about Tsvetaeva.” “You do not know how to distinguish. Tell him nothing about what you are doing or whom you know. I don’t like your seeing him. Be very careful.”

If I had to have dealings with the authorities, Nadezhda Iakovlevna coached me how to avoid trouble, for example, to look out for the person in every office who was KGB.
“Usually,” she explained, “they have a clear desk, since they don’t actually do any work, and when they say something, people do not argue with them. You can also tell by their eyes. They are dead behind. Lies do not bother them. It is very important to be able to spot them.”

It is interesting that since then I have spotted those types of eyes here, in my comings and goings, eyes like polished stones, with no human connection. Once you start looking for them, you find them everywhere, but there they were truly quite dangerous.

Nadezhda Iakovlevna wanted to know everything about my family, going back as many generations as I could recall, and what my life was like at home. She also loved to gossip and knew everything that was going on in Moscow with anyone—divorces, affairs, scandals, in-laws, fights, the miseries that communal apartments or lack of apartments imposed on people’s personal lives. This was a whole other side to my education. In the United States in 1970, divorce was not that common or accepted, at least in my experience, and abortion was never discussed. In the Soviet Union, abortion was the only form of birth control. Divorce was almost the only freedom people had. “Akh,” she would say. “Sex is a very cruel thing. And here, it is even crueler.” More tea. More cigarettes.

Food was difficult to come by, even in Moscow, and meat especially. In the American embassy, there was a small commissary for the employees, and exchange students were allowed to shop there. I brought packages to Nadezhda Iakovlevna as often as I could, but I knew she gave them to others; most people were terribly poor. I wanted to give her something, so one day I called around eleven o’clock in the morning and said I was going to make her an American dinner. She said, “Bring it over.” I brought a box of Uncle Ben’s Carolina rice, long grain, and a pound of hamburger meat, flown in frozen to the embassy daily from Finland, which I had defrosted in my room the night before. She instructed me on the rice. “You must measure it carefully and double the water,” she said, “or else it will be spoiled.” I asked for a measuring cup and she was puzzled. “We don’t have such things. Use a teacup.” She looked at the meat with great interest while I made patties and fried them plain with a little salt. I watched her as she took a bite, hoping she would like my treat. She closed her eyes and chewed slowly. Her edges seem to melt for a moment, as if she had gone somewhere else. “I haven’t had meat like that since before the revolution,” she finally said. I could say nothing. We sat quietly and ate our prerevolutionary dinner.

On another level of our friendship, Nadezhda Iakovlevna was eager to help me in my budding career. When I suggested that sometimes she might want to speak English (she had been a teacher of English for many years), she said, “No, we will speak Russian. You need it for your career. My career is over.” She gradually introduced me to literary people who knew about Tsvetaeva or could help me. I took Tsvetaeva’s poems with me everywhere. I also had my list of questions. Tsvetaeva began to take shape, to come alive from a kind of ghost behind words to something more solid. I was, after all, in her city, and hearing people speak about her helped me. Nadezhda Iakovlevna sent me to Pasternak’s son and wife and they talked about his father and Tsvetaeva, creating for me that thread, that connection. At the end of my stay, Nadezhda Iakovlevna was able through acquaintances to convince Tsvetaeva’s daughter to see me and the appointment was arranged.

Ariadna Sergeevna Efron had spent seventeen years in the camps and was living in an apartment in Moscow, something of a recluse. She did not mix with the dissident circles,
and was not eager to see foreigners. I was particularly nervous about this meeting, expecting her to be severe and closed. I have to mention that, because food was so hard to come by in the Soviet Union, I, who was fairly thin when I arrived in the fall, had, by this time, around January, lost about twenty pounds. This made me look younger, almost like an anorexic teenager. I arrived at the apartment at the correct time, and Ariadna Sergeevna opened the door. She was a woman about in her fifties, on the plump side, with glasses, and her hair piled on her head. When she saw me, she threw up her hands and said, “Oh, my God, you’re starving.” She immediately ran into the kitchen to cook me a meal, from soup to meat with potatoes, and tea. While I ate, she sat with hands folded and talked about her mother. All my prepared questions went out the window. She showed me some of Tsvetaeva’s notebooks and manuscripts. The notebooks moved me incredibly. I could imagine Tsvetaeva’s hand moving across those pages and pages of endless rhymes and wordplays, with scraps of verses—it was a glimpse into a craftsman at work. From seeing the traces of Tsvetaeva’s hand, I felt a link and suddenly the possibility of writing something about her. This was a tiny moment, but an important one for me. I dedicated my dissertation to Ariadna Sergeevna, because she had said “Yes” to me. She had taken that risk, when she really did not need to take any more risks. However, her openness was clearly a direct result of whatever Nadezhda Iakovlevna had accomplished or planned, and one of her many gifts to me.

The evening visits to Nadezhda Iakovlevna’s kitchen were different from our daytime chats. She would tell me if someone interesting was coming whom she thought I should meet. When people arrived, the first thing Nadezhda Iakovlevna would ask for was a joke (anekdot). She loved a good joke, especially one with a nice dig at Soviet reality. Then there would be the fun of trying to explain the joke to me. There was always a group around the table. The concept of a “circle” (krug) is something that we really do not have in this country. Nadezhda Iakovlevna’s circle included accomplished scientists, clerks, linguists, secretaries, famous scholars, mathematicians, writers, doctors, and ordinary people—a whole range of types who in our society would not be likely to mix, socially or otherwise. Like a twentieth-century Alice in Wonderland, I had fallen into a crack in the vast gray sinister surface of Soviet reality and had found myself in another world, in a circle of souls, drawn together by the Russian tradition of literary circles, which they consciously nurtured, cemented by their need to survive with dignity and fired by their rage-fed determination to preserve the scraps of culture worth preserving from the destructive “system” that surrounded them. This is the group of people that I fell in with. It was a concentrated and heady mixture of brilliance and the purest humanity.

Nadezhda Iakovlevna had another goal for me, in addition to keeping me safe and helping me get on with my dissertation. She wanted me to fully understand the horror, the levels of deception, the twistedness, the strangeness, the stupidity, the cruelty, and the pure human misery engendered by the Soviet regime. She wanted to make it clear that the reason the killing had stopped was that, in her words, “they got tired of blood.” She wanted me to understand that “there was no progress,” “there was no logic,” and “there was no innocence” possible in their world. She also wanted me to realize how the past informs the present, that you cannot plaster over it. She felt it was important for my future teaching career that I fully understood the environment and conditions in which such poetry as Tsvetaeva’s, Pasternak’s, Akhmatova’s, and Mandel’shtam’s was written, that I not just do text analysis, that the truth
not be brushed over. She wanted me to pass this understanding on to younger students in the
generations that were to come. She wanted nothing less than for me to carry her message
into a time when she could no longer do it.

I wish to end these notes with two evenings. I could call this “The Story of the Oilcloth and
the Can Opener.” One evening, when I arrived at Nadezhda Iakovlevna’s apartment, she was
unusually excited. She had gone out in the morning on a small errand. On the corner of her
block she had seen a man selling oilcloth. Where he got it, whether it was obtained legally or
illegally, stolen or by accident, was impossible to know, but it was an incredible find. In
Moscow, people spent much of their time at home sitting around their kitchen tables, which
were typically of wood, covered with oilcloth. The oilcloth became stained with tea and
coffee, burned with cigarette ash, and sticky with age. When it became old, however, it could
not be replaced, because there was a shortage. None was to be had anywhere. Nadezhda
Iakovlevna gave up her errand that morning and rushed back to her apartment. She searched
the drawers, bowls, jacket pockets, and bags for all the cash she could find, and ran back to
the man. She purchased his entire supply. Then she went home and started calling people.
“Tell mama to measure your table.” (Everyone had a mama at home.) “I have oilcloth. Come
tonight,” she would say. That evening I was witness to a frenzy of measuring and cutting.
The oilcloth had to be cut with mathematical precision so that there was no waste and
everybody got a decent piece. There were profuse thanks. Many mamas were made happy,
and Nadezhda Iakovlevna let out a sigh of deep satisfaction. She had accomplished some-
thing that day.

My last night in Moscow, I came to Nadezhda Iakovlevna’s with a bag full of things I
had brought with me from the States, much of it from the State Department list of what was
recommended by past exchange participants as being difficult to find in Russia. I did not
want to take anything back home that could possibly be useful. This could be anything at
all, so I had brought almost everything except my toothbrush. There was a crowd, because
they knew I was leaving. I piled everything on the kitchen table. As usual, the reaction was
not anything I could have imagined, even at that stage of my stay. Nadezhda Iakovlevna
reached for the shower cap. “I know what this is,” she said. “We had these before the
revolution. You use it to keep your hair dry when you take a shower. I’m taking this.”

Among the group around the table was a rather famous physicist, perhaps in his forties.
He reached for the small can opener. “This is intriguing,” he said. It was the metal kind from
Woolworth’s. I started to speak, but he held up his hand. “Don’t say anything,” he said. “I
will figure it out.” Now it became a game. Everyone was watching as he turned the can
opener in every direction and made up funny uses for it. He was baffled, and Nadezhda
Iakovlevna was clearly enjoying seeing him baffled. Then everyone around the table tried
with much hilarity, but to no avail. Finally, they gave up and I said, “It’s for opening cans”
(although, there was no Russian word for “can opener”). I had seen the dangerous method
the Russians used to open a can. They attacked it repeatedly with a knife, until the can gave
up the ghost. However, a considerable amount of blood was frequently sacrificed, as one’s
hands became cut, trying to hold on to the increasingly slippery can, which, with the re-
peated attacks, slowly oozed whatever liquid (watery or oily) was inside it.
Now someone went to Nadezhda Iakovlevna’s shelf and found a can of sardines. The game reached its next stage. Several people, including the physicist, tried, but could not figure out how it worked. I finally demonstrated the art of opening a can American-style, with that strange sense of power that magicians must feel when they do an impossible sleight-of-hand trick. I showed how the little lip of the can opener folded over the edge, grabbed the metal, was locked in place, and then with a few cranks, spun around, leaving a perfectly round receptacle, the lid a clean circle, and the contents intact. My audience threw up their hands. “Amazing!” “Fantastic!” “Pegochka, you are a genius!” Nadezhda Iakovlevna was grinning with delight, looking as if she had pulled off a coup. The evening continued in an atmosphere of hilarity and jokes.

This is not my whole story, but I leave them now, sitting at Nadezhda Iakovlevna’s kitchen table in the winter of 1971, looking at a can of sardines opened miraculously, without bloodshed.