# 46 The Girl from Odesa (April 2022)

*"From* ***"Fragments of Memoirs"***

*I was born in 1889 the same year as Charlie Chaplin and Tolstoy's Kreutzer Sonata, Hitler, the Eiffel Tower, and, it seems, TS Eliot. That summer, Paris was celebrating the hundredth anniversary of the storming of the Bastille. On the night of my birth – Ivanov's Night, 23rd June, the ancient Midsummer's Night celebrations are held.*

*I was named Anna in honour of my grandmother Anna Yegorovna Motovilova. Her mother was the Tatar princess Akhmatova, descended from Genghis Khan, whose name I made my nom de plume, not imagining that I was going to become a Russian poet. I was born in the Sarakini dacha (Bolshoi Fontan, 11th stop on the railway) near Odesa."*

I want to look this month at Anna Akhmatova, whose poems I've leafed through for many years. With the war going on in Ukraine - horrific, totally unjustifiable and world-shaking, as well as *world-shaping,* (as I write this in mid-March), her poetry becomes more understandable, also more focused and ironically relevant. She was born in Odesa (which is currently under siege), the southern Ukrainian port and she attended a secondary school in Kyiv, but she is more closely linked to the area around St Petersburg (Leningrad) and later Tashkent (there's a very Asiatic side to her … Genghis Khan…?).

She became known from the outset as one of the leaders of what was called "Acmeist" poetry, based on a localised circle (St Petersburg) of poets who set themselves *against* the modernist "imagist" work of that period, although *like* "imagism", it relied on spare, direct expression (full of images!) particularly linked to St Petersburg - it was passionate, often religious in inspiration and drew obliquely on private experience. Other notables in the group were Osip Mandelstam and her first husband Nikolai Gumilyov, though later she was linked in importance with Marina Tsvetayeva and Boris Pasternak.

Looking at her early poems (and she became popular early on rapidly with big sales of "Rosary", her 2nd collection), they seem rather detached from world events but not from

world culture. The allusions are often opaque, private and oblique. It's always difficult in another language to catch the intricacies and possible ironies. One is itching at times for more context to work out what she is getting at. The pictures of her suggest someone with considerable erotic energy, and one finds this, I think, in many of the poems. This seems to work somewhat *against* the rather 'heady' seriousness of the Acmeist agenda (which I've never really understood, nor found any clear description of). It would certainly explain something of her popularity.

Here is quite a typical poem from "Rosary", taken almost at random.

## In the Evening

There was such inexpressible sorrow
in the music in the garden.
The dish of oysters on ice
smelt fresh and sharp of the sea.

He said to me "I am a true friend!"
He touched my dress.
There is no passion
in the touch of his hands.

This is how one strokes a cat or a bird,
this is how one looks at a shapely horsewoman.
There is only laughter in his eyes
under the light gold of his eyelashes.

The violins mourning voices
Sing above the spreading smoke:
'Give thanks to heaven:
you are alone with your love for the first time.'
**(1913)**

Akhmatova by Modigliani

Why she is now seen as important, I think, is because of the way the tragic events of her own life, bound up in the February 1917 Revolution of the Bolsheviks, the Second World War and Stalinism, both before, during and after the war, caused her later poetry particularly to resonate with and reflect the great destitution, misery and loss suffered by so many in that era. While still at times very oblique, Akhmatova's poetry started to focus more and more on the tragic in human dramas (based very squarely on her own direct experience) - and her mission to use poetry to make people 'feel' became more urgent and vital.

Anna painted by Nathan Altman in 1914

We need to understand something of the background of her life, which I'll try and fill in rapidly. In 1910, she married her first husband, Nikolai Gumilyov, a fellow-poet with whom she had a son, Lev. Although he had courted her passionately for years, he soon lost interest in her and eventually they divorced in 1918. She married 4 times but also had affairs with many, including notably Amadeo Modigliani (whom she met in Paris), her fellow-poet Osip Mandelstam, and later possibly with Boris Pasternak and Alexander Blok (details are unclear). With the February Revolution (which began in St Petersburg in 1917) world events began to impact on her and her circle of friends. Many died or chose to leave Russia as life became increasingly difficult (cf *Doctor Zhivago!*), but she obstinately stayed on. In 1921, Gumilev was executed with many others in a purge of the intelligentsia by the Bolsheviks. From then on Akhmatova lived very much as a marked woman.

During the purges and terrors of the 20s and 30s – with the rise to power of Stalin, Akhmatova had narrow escapes herself and her son Lev was frequently thrown into prison

with the harshness always of the Siberian labour camps and the possibility, at any time, of death by execution or illness. Osip Mandelstam died in a labour camp of typhus in 1938.

With the advent of the Second World War and the Nazi invasion of Russia with the siege of Leningrad (where Akhmatova witnessed the early stages before managing to escape), her poetry increased in scope as she tried to find new forms and different ways to express the impact of all the suffering and devastation.

In the end, her poetry – particularly "Requiem", which is relatively short, and "Poem Without a Hero", which is much longer and on which she worked for over 20 years until late in her life - bears witness: it testifies to the darkness and brutality of war. Her best poetry comes from the heart, and she is someone who herself stood in lines for years waiting to visit her son in prison (he was imprisoned 3 times); she knew the people taken out and shot in random executions, saw and felt the suffering of the ordinary people around her.

Now, at a time when Russian savagery is being unleashed on Ukraine (so long linked in its culture and its past with Russia) with the disgusting hypocrisy of Putin's narrative of "liberating and de-nazifying" a sovereign country which only wished to rule itself democratically, Akhmatova's poetry strikes many ironic chords. As she invokes the terrors of Stalin against his own people and the crimes of humanity committed in earlier eras, her writing becomes steadily less precious and inward-turning. She is still difficult to read, because her allusive, epigrammatic stanzas hide (perhaps on purpose…?) as much as they reveal. (NB In the Stalinist period there were many times when Akhmatova and her friends were too terrified even to set pen to paper – they would memorise their poems and recite them to each other. Anything written down, let alone published, could incriminate you and lead to summary executions.) I realise that there is far more to her poetry, but I hope this cursory glance at her work leads to more awareness of her.

Here, anyway, is "Requiem" (You can find access to "Poem Without a Hero" in the Appendix).

## Requiem

No, not under a foreign sky,
No not cradled by foreign wings –
Then I was with my people, I,
With my people, there, sorrowing.
**1961**

## Instead of a Preface

In the dreadful years of the Yezhov terror I spent seventeen months in prison queues in Leningrad. One day someone 'Identified' me. Then a woman standing behind me, lips blue with cold, who of course had never heard my name, woke from that numbness that affected us all and whispered in my ear (there, everyone spoke in whispers):
– Could you describe this?
And I said: I can.
Then something like a tormented smile passed over what had once been her face.
**1st April 1957**

*Note: Nikolai Yezhov as head of the NKVD from 1936 instituted a savage purge, akin to the Cultural Revolution in China, involving denunciations and show trials. He was in turn denounced in 1938 by Molotov, executed, and replaced by Beria. People in the Soviet Union came to call the Great Terror: Yezhovshchina (the time of Yezhov).*

## Dedication

Before this sorrow mountains bow,
The vast river's ceased to flow,
The ever-strong prison bolts
Hold the 'convict crews' now,
Abandoned to deathly longing.
For someone the sun glows red,

For someone the wind blows fresh –
But we know none of that, instead
We only hear the soldier's tread,
Keys scraping against our flesh.
Rising as though for early mass,
Through the city of beasts we sped,
There met, breathless as the dead,
Sun low, a mistier Neva.
Far ahead, Hope singing still, as we passed.
Condemned…the sudden rush of tears,
She thought she knew all separation,
In pain, blood driven from the heart,
As if she's hurled to earth, apart,
Yet walks…staggers…is in motion…
Where now my chance-met friends
Of those two years satanic flight?
What Siberian storms do they resist,
And in what frosted lunar orb exist?
To them it is I send my farewell cry.
**March 1940**

## Prologue

Those days, when only the dead
Smiled, glad to be at peace,
And Leningrad, unneeded, swayed,
Throwing wide its penitentiary.
When legions of the condemned,
Maddened by torment, passed,
Brief the songs of parting then,
The steam trains' farewell whistles,
Dead stars hung above us,

And innocent Russia writhed
Under boots stained with blood,
And the Black Marias' tyres.

**1.**

They took you away at dawn.
As though at a wake, I followed,
In the dark room weeping children,
Among icons, the candle guttered.
On your lips, the chill of an ikon,
On your brow a death sweat. I won't forget.
I'll howl, like a woman led out to be shot,
In the Streltsy uprising,
Dragged to the Kremlin wall.
**1935.**

**2.**

Quiet flows the silent Don,
Yellow moonlight fills the home.

Fills it, with cap askew,
Yellow moon sees the shadow.

A woman there is sick,
A woman there, alone.

Husband buried, son in chains,
Pray for me.

**3.**

No this is not me, someone else is suffering.
I could not stand this : let black drapes,

Cover what happened,
And let them take away the lamps…
Night.

**4.**

If I could show your former ironic self,
That once carefree sinner of Tsarskoye Selo,
So popular in your circle of friends,
How your life will turn out:
Three hundredth in the line with your prison parcel,
And let your hot tears
Burn through New Year's ice.
See the prison poplars sway,
In silence. How many
Innocent lives are ending there today…

**5.**

Seventeen months I've pleaded
For you to come home.
Flung myself at the hangman's feet,
My terror, oh my son.
And I can't work out
In all this eternal confusion,
Who's beast, and who's man,
How long till execution.
There are only flowers of dust,
The ringing of censers, tracks just
Running somewhere, nowhere, far.
An enormous star gazes
Deeply into my eyes,
Threatening swift destruction.

**6.**

Lightly the weeks fly, too,
I will never grasp what happened.
How the white nights looked
At you, my darling boy, in prison,
So now again they gaze,
With the burning eye of a hawk,
They tell of your crucifixion,
They speak of death.
**1939**.

**7. Sentence**

It has fallen, the word of stone
On my still beating breast.
No matter, I was prepared, you know,
I'll get by, somehow.

I've things to do today:
I must crush memory down,
I must turn my heart to stone,
I must try living, again.

Or else….Hot summer whispers,
As if for a Black Sea holiday.
Long, long ago, I foresaw this
This empty house, this shining day.
**Summer, 1939.**

**8. To Death**

You'll come regardless – why not today?
I await you – life is very hard.
I've turned out the light, opened the door

For you, so simple, so wonderful.
Take any shape you wish,
Burst in like a poisoned shell,
Sidle in like a slick bandit,
Or a typhus germ from hell.
Or a made-up denunciation,
Always sickeningly familiar –
Where I see policemen's helmets, And a concierge white with fear.
It's all one now. The Yenisey swirling,
While the Pole star's alight.
And in final terror closing
Blessed eyes, blue and bright.
**19th August 1939 The House on the Fontanka, Leningrad.**

**9.**

Already madness hovers
Obscuring half my mind,
I drink its wine: its fires
Lure me blind to the dark valley.

I realise, I must yield
Victory to it now,
Must listen to it speak,
Strange fever on my brow.

And I must take nothing
With me that's my own
(However hard I beg,
However I pester it with prayer):

I am disowned!): Not my son's fearful eyes –
Suffering, turned to stone,
Not the day that storms rise,
Nor the prison meeting-room,

Nor the blessed coolness of hands,
The lime-trees' shady agitation,
Nor the slender distant sounds
Of his final consolation.
**4th May 1940 The House on the Fontanka.**

**10. Crucifixion**

*'Mother, do not weep for me,*
*Who am in the grave.'*

**I**

Angelic choirs, the mighty hour of glory,
And heaven confused in the fiery deep.
To the Father: 'Why hast thou forsaken me!'
But to the Mother: 'O, do not weep…'

**II**

Magdalene beat her breast and wept,
The beloved disciple turned to stone,
But there, no one dared, no one looked
Where the Mother stood, still, and alone.
**1940-1943**

## Epilogue

**I**

I learned to know how faces fall apart,
How fear looks out beneath the eye-lids,
How suffering etches into the cheeks
Hard pages of cuneiform.
How the black, the ash-blond hair, In an instant turns to silver,
Learned how smiles fade on submissive lips,
Learned terror's dry racking laughter.
Not only for myself I pray,
But for all who stood there, all,
In bitter cold, or burning July heat,
Beneath that red, blind prison wall.

**II**

Once more, the remembered hour draws near.
I see you, feel you, hear you:

You, they could barely carry you to the window,
And you, whom earth claimed before your time,

And you, who shook your lovely head of hair,
Saying: 'Coming here is like coming home'.

I'd like to summon you all by name,
But the lists are lost, undiscoverable.

I've woven a great shroud for them here,
Out of poor words I chanced to overhear.

Remembering them always, everywhere,
Unforgotten in every new terror's care

And if they gag my tormented lips,
shut my mouth, where a hundred million people cry,

Let them still remember me, today,
On the eve of my remembrance day.

And if ever in this my native country
They choose to erect a statue for me,

I agree to that ceremonial honour,
But on one condition – don't set it there

Beside the sea-shore, where I was born:
My last ties with it so long outworn,

Nor in the Imperial Garden, by that dead tree
Where an inconsolable shade looks for me,

But here, where I stood three hundred hours,
Where no one ever opened the doors,

Lest I forget in death's blessed oblivion
The Black Maria's screaming hum,

Forget the terrible clang, the gates that hail
Like a wounded beast, the old woman's wail.

And from my eyelids, bronze, unmoving,
May snowflakes fall, like tears melting,

And the prison doves coo far from me,
And, on the Neva, ships sail, silently.
**March, 1940**

To finish, here, more or less at random and taken from a longer poem, "Wind of War", is a reflection from the time of the Siege of Leningrad. It could refer to any of the senseless attacks on civilians in cities throughout the world – Hanoi, Grozny, Aleppo, Mariupol. The most terrible irony is that Russia under Putin seems to have forgotten so easily the terrible havoc wreaked on it (and *by* its leaders!!) in the 20th century. *When will they ever learn*…?

**6. & 7. In Memory of a Leningrad boy, my neighbour, Valya Smirnov**

**1.**

The lights are out.
Trenches are dug in the garden.
Petersburg's orphans
are my little children –
one can't breathe underground,
pain drills the forehead.
Through the bombing
A child's small voice is heard.

**2.**

Kock with your little fist – I'll open up.
I always opened my door to you.
Now I've gone beyond the high mountain,
the desert and the blazing heat,
but I will never give you up…

I did not hear you crying
Or asking me for bread.
Bring me a twig from the maple tree,
Or just some blade of green grass

As you did last spring.
Bring me in your tiny cupped hands
Some clear, cool water from our Neva,
And with my own hands I'll wipe clean
The blood from your little golden head.
**23rd April 1942**

**APPENDIX**

I found this excellent book on the internet – the translation of "Poem Without a Hero" is particularly well done. You will find it on Page 148. There may be no heroes as such, but I came across an interesting speculation that the *real* hero may be 'Language' – the Russian tongue. "The Word" was always at the heart of Acmeism and she was also a great Pushkin scholar who very widely read in lots of literatures.

https://monoskop.org/images/3/3c/Akhmatova_Anna_The_Word_That_Causes_Deaths_Defeat.pdf

Anna Akhmatova
1889-1966

Anna by Kuzma Petrov-Vodkin