

Tracing Mansions: Anna Akhmatova (1889 – 1966)

In the 1930's, Anna Akhmatova was standing, weak with lack of food, in biting winds in a long queue outside a Stalinist prison in order to visit her son who had been arrested yet again. She relates how someone recognized her as a poet and spoke to her.

One day somebody in the crowd identified me. Standing behind me was a woman, with lips blue from cold, who had, of course, never heard me called by name before. Now she started out of the torpor common to us all and asked me in a whisper (everyone whispered there): 'Can you describe this?' And I said: 'I can.' Then something like a smile passed fleetingly over what had once been her face.

This reveals the respect which Russian people regarded poetry and its ability to bear witness to the times, however tragic. Another great Russian poet, Osip Mandelstam, with whom Akhmatova once had a relationship, wrote:

Poetry is respected only in this country – people are killed for it. There is no place where more people are killed for it.

These words turned out to be prophetic as Mandelstam himself was to die in a Stalinist labour camp.

In her long poem, Requiem, Akhmatova begins with a dedication to the millions of political prisoners who like the

protagonist in Kafka's *The Trial*, were arrested without being told what their crime was.

DEDICATION

*Mountains fall before this grief,
A mighty river stops its flow,
But prison doors stay firmly bolted
Shutting off the convict burrows
And an anguish close to death.
Fresh winds softly blow for someone,
Gentle sunsets warm them through; we don't know this,
We are everywhere the same, listening
To the scrape and turn of hateful keys
And the heavy tread of marching soldiers.
Waking early, as if for early mass,
Walking through the capital run wild, gone to seed,
We'd meet - the dead, lifeless; the sun,
Lower every day; the Neva, mistier:
But hope still sings forever in the distance.
The verdict. Immediately a flood of tears,
Followed by a total isolation,
As if a beating heart is painfully ripped out, or,
Thumped, she lies there brutally laid out,
But she still manages to walk, hesitantly, alone.
Where are you, my unwilling friends,
Captives of my two satanic years?
What miracle do you see in a Siberian blizzard?
What shimmering mirage around the circle of the moon?
I send each one of you my salutation, and farewell.*



Anna was born in the Black Sea port of Odessa in 1889, her parents were affluent and descended from Russian nobility. Shortly after Ann was born, her family moved close to St. Petersburg. She began writing poetry at the age of 11 and three years later she met a young poet called Nikolay Gumilev who encouraged her to go on writing. At the age of 21,

she married him but the marriage was short lived.

It was in St. Petersburg in 1917 that the Russian revolution began. The civil war led to appalling shortages of food and water and countless number of citizens died of starvation and disease. Many people fled to Europe and the USA, including

many writers and artists but Anna felt that it was her moral and artistic duty to stay. She felt that those artists who escaped the suffering were traitors to their own country.

In 1921, Anna's first husband was suspected of being involved in an anti-Bolshevik plot and put up against a wall and shot. Although her poetry was at first accepted by the government, in 1925 her poetry was banned as it was viewed as not extolling the virtues of the version of Marxism chosen by the Russian communist party. Her common law husband, Nikolai Punin was arrested and he later died in a Siberian labour camp. Her son was repeatedly taken into custody and questioned. Anna's apartment came to be bugged and her every move was watched. She only narrowly avoided the fate of so many artists and intellectuals of her time: execution.

Somehow or other, she learned to adapt to a life of poverty and constant terror as this moving poem reveals.

I Taught Myself To Live Simply

*I taught myself to live simply and
wisely,
to look at the sky and pray to God,
and to wander long before evening
to tire my superfluous worries.
When the burdocks rustle in the
ravine
and the yellow-red rowanberry
cluster droops
I compose happy verses
about life's decay, decay and
beauty.
I come back. The fluffy cat
licks my palm, purrs so sweetly
and the fire flares bright
on the saw-mill turret by the lake.
Only the cry of a stork landing on
the roof
occasionally breaks the silence.
If you knock on my door
I may not even hear.*

As if the sufferings of the 1920's and 30's were not enough to endure, Akhmatova witnessed the Siege of Leningrad – formerly St. Petersburg - when the German army blockaded the city for some two and a half years. It is believed as many as one and half million citizens died, many of them through starvation. Her great work, *Poem Without A Hero* was dedicated to the victims as was the Seventh Symphony of Shostakovich. In 1942, Anna and the great composer were evacuated to Usbekistan where

she almost died of typhus. Seven years later, her son was sentenced to ten year in a Siberian labour camp. Slowly, Akhmatova's reputation was restored by the State and she became an honoured citizen who had not only endured decades of hardship and persecution, she bore witness to her country's struggles and kept alive a sense of humanity and hope. One of her finest poems is simply called *Everything*.

*Everything's looted, betrayed and traded,
black death's wing's overhead.
Everything's eaten by hunger, unsated,
so why does a light shine ahead?*

*By day, a mysterious wood, near town,
breathes out a cherry, a cherry perfume.
By night, on July's sky deep, and transparent,
new constellations are thrown.*

*And something miraculous will come
close to the darkness and ruin,
something no-one, no-one, has known,
though we've longed for it since we were children.*

Anna died from a heart attack in 1965 and memorial services were held for her in both Moscow and Leningrad, now renamed St. Petersburg

We Don't Know How To Say Goodbye

*We don't know how to say good-bye
We wander on, shoulder by shoulder.
Already the sun is going down.
You're moody, I am your shadow.

Let's step inside a church and watch
baptisms, marriages, masses for the dead.
Why are we different from the rest?
Outdoors again, each of us turns his head.

Or else, let's sit in the graveyard
On the trampled snow, sighing to each other.
That stick in your hand is tracing mansions
In which we shall always be together*