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Hope Against Hope (Harvill Press Editions)

Nadezhda Mandelstam

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'Suddently, at about one o'clock in the morning, there was a sharp, unbearably explicit knock on the door. 'They've come for Osip', I said'. In 1933 the poet Osip Mandelstam- friend to Boris Pasternak and Anna Akhmatova- wrote a spirited satire denouncing Josef Stalin. It proved to be a sixteen-line death sentence. For his one act of defiance he was arrested by the Cheka, the secret police, interrogated, exiled and eventually re-arrested. He died en route to one of Stalin's labour camps. His wife, Nadezhda (1899-1980) was with him on both occasions when he was arrested, and she loyally accompanied him into exile in the Urals, where he wrote his last great poems. Although his mind had been unbalanced by his ordeal in prison, his spirit remained unbroken. Eager to solve 'the Mandelstam problem', the Soviet authorities invited the couple to stay in a rest home near Moscow. Nadezhda saw it as an opportunity for her husband to mend his shattered life, but it was a trap and he was arrested for the last time. 'My case will never be closed', Osip once said, and it is mostly through the courageous efforts of Nadezhda that his memory has been preserved. Hope against Hope, her first volume of memoirs, is a vivid and disturbing account of her last four years with her husband, the efforts she made to secure his release, to rescue his manuscripts from oblivion, and later, tragically, to discover the truth about his mysterious death. It is also a harrowing, first-hand account of how Stalin and his henchmen persecuted Russia's literary intelligentsia in the 1930s and beyond. Nadezhda Mandelstam spent most of the Second World War in Tashkent, living with her friend Akhmatova. Only in 1964 was she at last granted permission to return to Moscow. Here she began Hope against Hope, and later Hope Abandoned, the two memoirs of her life.

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