

## JOURNEY TO ARMENIA

### Director's Notes

The project aims at presenting Osip and Nadezhda Mandelstam's story, their human and poetic experience, through the recollection of the journey the two writers undertook in 1930 in the Caucasus. The historical and political background is that of Stalin's crimes, particularly the persecution of intellectuals. The time change - the journey is set in the present - is used to look into the consequences of those crimes and how they affect the region today. The story takes place in the context of the extraordinary rural and urban landscape of the southern Caucasus, ideal and physical destination of Mandelstam's journeys. The Caucasus, particularly Armenia, are shown in all the richness and complexity of their cultural heritage, intrinsically European according to the lesson of the Russian poet.

Osip Emilevich Mandelstam, considered by Nobel prize winner Joseph Brodsky "the greatest Russian poet of the twentieth century", was born in Warsaw in 1891 into a Jewish family. After a childhood and adolescence in Saint Petersburg, he completed his studies at the Sorbonne in Paris and at the University of Heidelberg. He was one of the founders of the avant-garde literary movement of acmeism which Anna Achmatova and Nicolai Stepanovich Gumilev also belonged to.

In his lifetime Mandelstam published several collections of poetry, prose, memoirs and literary essays. Fascinated by Italy, he chose Dante to expose his own poetics, dedicating his famous *Conversation* to the Tuscan poet.

In 1933 he wrote the *Stalin Epigram*, a poem strongly critical of the dictator and the communist regime. The poem led to his arrest, deportation and sentencing to hard labour in a Siberian gulag where he died, probably towards the end of 1938.

Following the sentence by the soviet authorities, his work disappeared from public circulation. His wife, who escaped arrest, managed to conceal numerous texts and, not trusting paper, preserved most of Osip's poems by memorising them.

To describe her own ordeal, Nadezhda published two memoirs in the 70s (*Hope Against Hope* and *Hope Abandoned*), which give one of the clearest descriptions of the mechanisms of Stalinist terror. Drawing on her personal experience, the writer explains how it was possible to arrest, deport and assassinate millions in the indifference (or complicity) of those spared.

The documentary script is based on her writings.

The narration follows the route taken by the two writers in the

Caucasus in 1930 and described by Mandelstam in his *Journey to Armenia*. Osip went there in an attempt to recover his poetic inspiration. For five years, in fact, he had been unable to write poetry, largely because of the regime's increasingly choking hold on his life. To get back into writing he chose the Caucasus, namely Armenia, because he considered the Black Sea region, by virtue of its connection with the Mediterranean, "the book which the first men studied".

This dimension, the Caucasus-Mediterranean, the Caucasus-Europe, represents one of the recurrent elements in the project, through the continuous references of the script - an original summary of the work of the two writers - the images and the filmed encounters with the characters appearing in the documentary, mainly people from the world of culture in the areas visited.

The description of the Mandelstams' travels through the Caucasus, with the Stalinist persecutions and Soviet terror in the background, heightens our awareness of one of the most dramatic chapters in European history. The story of Osip and Nadezhda Mandelstam is effective in stimulating a reflection, not only on the European history of the XXth century but also on totalitarian ideology. Nadezhda Mandelstam, in particular, explains with the precision of reference to daily life, how the persecution, imprisonment, deportation and murder of millions of people were possible before the indifference (or complicity) of those who were spared.

The purpose of this documentary is, accordingly, to recognise and give visibility to Nadezhda Mandelstam's, and her more famous husband's, work, stimulating a debate on the soviet crimes in the context of recuperating the memory of European history. At the same time the intention is to introduce the audience to the Caucasus, revealing its beauty and historical-cultural complexity.

From a formal perspective, the documentary shows the journey of a poet, and maintains a poet's tone as the heart of the narration. Nadezhda Mandelstam's clarity of recollection contrasts with the movement of the images and the composition, which direct us abruptly to the surfacing memories.

The recollection is not past, but present. The protagonist remembers angrily the soviet persecution which forced her into isolation and her husband to death, superimposing different moments in time - the happy times of their last journey together and the time of solitude. The soundtrack spells out the various moments and stages in the journey, in time and space, uniting voice and image.

The places visited and people encountered have a dual role - recounting the journey of the poet and his wife in 1930, and the Caucasus today. At a visual level this mixture takes on the fairytale form of the Armenian landscape (Karahunj/Zorats Karer,

Ararat, Vayots Dzor), highlighting two themes in particular: the place of Armenia in European culture and the transition and wars following the collapse of the soviet system.

The theme of Armenia and Europe emerges through Osip's fascination with his sacred Mediterranean, the Black Sea and Ararat, culminating in the episode of Matendaran, the Yerevan Museum which contains thousands of documents and manuscripts in the Armenian language. Here Mandelstam's intrinsically anti-soviet position prevails, in his productive and dialectic attitude to European culture, in his search for his own place in a history seen as continuous, whereas the Soviet considered to be bearers of a new era, by definition better than all those preceding it, with a new history starting from zero.

The image chosen to represent the second theme, however, (the transition and long wave of disasters produced by the Soviet system) is that of the refugees from the Russian-Georgian war in 2008, found by the river Inguri, and a former fighter in the war between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno Karabakh. The pictures of town fringes (Tibilisi, Yerevan) show the destitution after the transition, as does a mine factory (kombinat) met on the journey.

At the centre of the narration there remains, however, the love of a woman for a man, her will to understand his inner feelings (the fatal attraction of Armenia), continuing her dialogue with him after his death, through his poems.