

Journey to Armenia

A. Foreword

1930. A poet crosses the Caucasus from Abkhazia to Armenia. He is traveling the region where the Argonauts, helped by Medea, had seized the Golden Fleece. He arrives on the slopes of the Ararat, the cradle of civilization according to a Persian legend, a mountain that keeps the secret of the Ark according to the exegetes of the Holy Scriptures.

That poet is Osip Ėmil'evič Mandelstam, a Polish Jew raised in Saint Petersburg, the greatest Russian poet of the XX century according to the Nobel prize Joseph Brodsky. The moment he decides to face this journey, he has already published the manifesto of his poetics and some of his most known works: "Kamen", "Tristia", "The Noise of Time", "Feodosia", "The Egyptian Stamp". Following a personal mythopoesys, he moves towards the place where Hellenism and Judeo-Christian culture met with the East. The poet believes that the Caucasus, and namely Armenia, place of untimely meetings between different traditions, represent the primary breeding ground from which comes European civilization.

Mandelstam is in a critical phase of his own human and artistic journey. He is in search for truth, the truth that "allows us to better understand ourselves within tradition". In his poetics, the Caucasus represents the "Holy Land", and the Black Sea is its Mediterranean. He therefore refers to the cradle of civilization, in search for the primary purity of the word, of the most profound stages of language. At the same time, the poet is in search for new forms of expression that allow him to recover his creative burst.

The search leads to a positive outcome. Many years later his wife Nadezhda Jakovlevna would write that the journey to Armenia had given him back his "gift for poetry".

Mandelstam, however, is being closely watched. The personal protection from Nikolai Bukharin allowed him to leave Moscow, but the Soviet power has long been suspicious of him. The political police is watching him.

The fears of the Kremlin are well-grounded. Close to the revolutionary ideals as a youngster, Mandelstam is now disgusted by the degeneration of the Soviet rule. He has seen the misery and hunger caused by the forced collectivization system imposed on peasants by Stalin, he suffers for the barbarity of a public debate reduced to the dictator's word. Confronted with the development model theorized by the Soviets, and the blind faith in the science of progress, the poet sets out on a journey backwards.

In the Caucasus, unstable border between East and West at the farthest end of Europe, Mandelstam finds the matrices of his cultural belonging. Here, however, he also meets with the dark side of the border, the nearness that becomes confrontation instead of fruitful renewal.

The physical and existential growth faced during the journey, moreover, leads him to side more and more against dictatorship. The satirical poem, "*Kremlin Highlander*", a straightforward attack on Stalin, wins him exile in 1935 and finally prison and death in a Soviet concentration camp in Siberia, in 1938.

B. Development

The same places visited in the Caucasus by Osip and Nadezhda Mandelstam, 80 years later, are the setting of the documentary "Journey to Armenia". Along constantly changing border lines, the Caucasus is today ground for new confrontations, also as a consequence of its being so central in the geography of energy flows. War, de facto States, new quests for identity mark a region still divided between East and West both on a cultural and a political level.

The physical journey on marshrutkas (collective taxis), from Abkhazia to Nagorno Karabakh, is accompanied by a journey into the life and work of Osip Mandelstam. The main elements of Mandelstam's poetry appear through the words of his widow, Nadezhda Yakovlevna. At the time of his journey to Armenia, in fact, Mandelstam's had already been banned from public debate. He could no longer publish, his previous works had been seized and after 4 years of internment he was finally sent to concentration camps. His work could only survive thanks to the efforts made by his widow, who learned by heart her husband's poems so as to deliver them to posterity.

The journey to Armenia becomes therefore a reflection on poetry and authority, on the relation between the poet Osip Mandelstam and his time, on the contrast between civilization (the Armenian architecture and language) and barbarity (sovietism). The abandoned soviet kombinats, the signs of the destruction of soviet rule, become the video-track of the words of Nadezhda Yakovlevna and of Mandelstam's poems. The signs of recent conflicts in the region (the Russia-Georgia war of 2008, the ongoing conflict in Nagorno Karabakh) reminds us that the twentieth century dramas are still far from over.

The words of Osip and Nadezhda Mandelstam lead us through the same places they had traveled across in 1930, up to the slopes of the Ararat, on the border - long closed because of the Nagorno Karabakh war - between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The fall of the

Soviet Union and the difficulties of the transition period have transformed once tourist towns in ghost towns. The war in August of 2008 between Russia and Georgia affected also Sukhumi, starting point of the Russian poet's journey and today the capital of the self-proclaimed Republic of Abkhazia. Continuing the journey South-bound, in Georgia, refugees and the traces of recent bombings make the landscape grievous, while the crossing of the Nagorno Karabakh once again shows the conflict between Armenians and Azerbaijani described 80 years earlier by the Russian poet.

Still, in the extraordinary landscape at the Ararat's feet, the force of Mandelstam's intuition reveals itself again. Through the words of the poet, following his search for a primary purity in the place of contamination par excellence, the dream and the image take shape again. It is Europe revealing itself. At the end of the journey, the borders crossed echo as a curse but also as an extraordinary possibility, that of an encounter between the different traditions that found their primitive expression among these mountains.

C. Narrative structure

From an abandoned promenade in Sukhumi, on the Black Sea banks, the journey tracing the poet-Mandelstam begins. The narrative, poetic and iconographic references of the previous journey mix with the new visual dimension of the present post-Soviet space. We see the city through the eyes of the camera, trying to recognize the traces left by time after Mandelstam's passing. A funeral procession brings us back to the early pages of the poet's journal (*"I was stabbed in Sukhumi by the ancient ritual of the funeral mourning"*).

The journey begins on a taxi South-bound, that goes through the places of the recent war among Abkhazians, Russians and Georgians, up to the uncertain border between the secessionist Republic and Tbilisi. On the separation line, we meet people traveling on both banks of the Inguri river, all of them tell where they are going.

From the Georgian city of Zugdidi the journey continues on a train to Tbilisi, Mandelstam's "pistachio-green" city. The meetings continue, fortuitous. The register of the conversations brings us back to Mandelstam's speculations years earlier. At the center of the dialogs with occasional travel companions is the relation between Europe - political/cultural subject and oneiric presence - and the region.

The journey finally enters in Mandelstam's Holy Land, on the banks of the Sevan lake. Here we visit the Arakeloc and Saint Karapet churches, architectural monuments from the 7th century, then go on to the enchanted landscape of the Armenian mountains. In Ecmjardin we find a meridian engraved in the rose-shaped stone described by

Mandelstam. In Astarak we visit a small church, see the ruins of Zvartnoc before climbing up the peak of Alagez (now Aragac), an extinct volcano over 4.000 meters tall, which forms a natural barrier between Northern Armenia and the valley of the Arakses river. Tracing Mandelstam's journey we encounter artists, observe early Christian architecture, listen to legends.

When the journey arrives in Shushi/Shusha, in Nagorno Karabakh, we hear Mandelstam's tale from years before echo as an omen. Mandelstam had crossed the town devastated by a pogrom, and dedicated it the poem *"The Coachman"*, from 1931 (*High up on the mountain side in Moslem country we feasted with death/and it was dreadful, as in a dream. We came across a coachman/face burned, of raisins/silent, gloomy, he reminded us/of a labourer of the devil*).

The journey continues showing the places and listening to the voices of a forgotten war. Another transfer, on a rented car, takes us towards the last leg of the journey, Yerevan, imagining to carry on to the peaks of the Ararat in the distance.

D. Visual approach

The journey set out on by Mandelstam, and described in his work, is not a journey through space but through time and memory, in search for the roots of the primary word. The images accompanying the journey will thus be word-images, stone-images.

The colors are those of a rugged nature, Mandelstam's "land of the screaming stones". The stoniness of the land and its clay-yellow dimension will blend with man-made constructions. As to how the landscape is presented, the most explicit reference is the one to the movie *"Tsvet granata"* (*"The color of pomegranates"*) by Sergey Paradzhanov, dedicated to the life of the Armenian poet Sajat Nova. Here, the Armenian landscapes are static, theatrical, the main characters of the narration. The season of the filming is summer.

There are no head-on interviews in the documentary, the dialogs are those of a man who talks to another man.

The references to Mandelstam's *"Journey to Armenia"* and to his cycle of poems, *"Armenia"*, appear as signs of word-sound that interrupt the flowing of the images.