Screenplay for the film "1934 — Osip Mandelstam. Historical Chronicles with Nikolai Svanidze" written by Marina Zhukova, translated by AI, and preceded by a summary also written by AI

Screenplay Summary:

The text intertwines the political context of 1934 in the USSR with the personal story of the poet Osip Mandelstam. It begins with the 17th Congress of the Communist Party, the "Congress of Victors," where Stalin proclaims the final triumph of socialism and the correctness of the Party line "along the whole front." These assertions will later be enshrined in the 1936 Stalin Constitution, drafted by Bukharin, which declares that socialism has "fully and irrevocably" triumphed. Nadezhda Mandelstam describes a society in a near-hypnotic state: people have been persuaded that history has entered a new era, that their only role is to submit to "historical necessity"; they lose will and independent judgement, and believe conditions abroad are worse than in the USSR.

In August 1934 the First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers convenes under the close supervision of the NKVD. Delegations from sailors, kolkhozniks, metro builders and minority peoples are paraded as proof of the unity of people and writers. But the security apparatus infiltrates these delegations, monitors moods, and even hunts down an anonymous leaflet comparing Soviet writers to prostitutes who sell not their bodies but their souls, trapped in a "brothel" from which there is no escape. At the same time the first writers' dachas in Peredelkino are being allocated; material privileges and surveillance go hand in hand.

At the core of the narrative lies Mandelstam, already a major poet but materially marginal: lodging in grim dorm rooms, plagued by bedbugs, dependent on others' hospitality. In late 1933, the authorities unexpectedly grant him an apartment in a prestigious writers' cooperative — an implicit advance from the state. There he composes his famous epigram on Stalin, the "Kremlin highlander," a vicious satire of Stalin's appearance, cruelty and entourage. He knows the danger but insists on reciting it to a handful of trusted friends, as if courting disaster. Pasternak warns him that this is not a literary act but suicide.

The text also recounts a revealing episode: a quarrel over 75 roubles with a young "national" poet leads to a comrades' court presided over by Alexei Tolstoy. During the row, the young poet assaults Mandelstam's wife, but the court focuses solely on preserving the reputation of the Party member; the beating is not condemned. Mandelstam reads this in terms of a Pushkin-style code of honour — a wife insulted demands vengeance — and becomes obsessed with the idea of slapping Tolstoy. In spring 1934 he finally does so in Leningrad, saying, "That's for your comrades' court." The incident causes a scandal; even Gorky makes an antisemitic remark, suggesting how tightly the ideological vise has closed.

Mandelstam is arrested in the night of 13–14 May 1934. What follows are interrogations at the Lubyanka: sleep deprivation, thirst, harsh light, threats, psychological manipulation, a planted cellmate who spreads rumours that all his acquaintances are under arrest. Mandelstam falls into a severe mental breakdown with auditory hallucinations, a condition doctors recognise as typical of those who "come from there." His investigator, Nikolai Shivarov ("Khristoforych"), a Chekist who loves literature, takes a perverse pleasure in his suffering, telling him that now he will learn the

“stimulating” fear that produces poetry. Yet Mandelstam later senses in him a hidden hatred of Stalin and an awareness of his own doomed fate in the system — and indeed Shivarov is shot in 1938.

Through the efforts of Akhmatova, Pasternak and especially a letter from Bukharin, the case reaches Stalin. Stalin has the sentence revised: three years’ exile in the northern town of Cherdyn becomes “minus twelve,” a ban on residing in Moscow, Leningrad and ten other major cities. For the author of the Stalin epigram this is an astonishing reprieve. Stalin writes a mock-indignant note on Bukharin’s letter (“Who gave them the right to arrest Mandelstam? Outrageous…”) that no one else sees; he is playing a role, amusing himself. He then phones Pasternak, emphasising that “Mandelstam is a master,” and reproaches him for not interceding more vigorously.

Mandelstam chooses Voronezh as his place of banishment (remembering a prison doctor there who might prove useful). There he writes roughly a quarter of his life’s work, but lives in poverty. Briefly employed at the local theatre and radio, he is soon dismissed; the local Writers’ Union refuses financial help. Under this pressure, in early 1937 he writes an “Ode to Stalin,” unlike anything he has done before — laboriously, at a desk, like a piece of commissioned work. He even rings up a senior NKVD official and reads it to him over a public phone, then snaps: “There is no one else I can read to.” The official, Semyon Dukelsky, fails to “get” the ode. It is too dense, too literary; it lacks the punch and simplicity of the “Highlander,” cannot be memorised by informers, cannot become popular propaganda. It does not give Stalin what he wanted — a definitive poetic monument.

Throughout, the text widens to show the broader system: exiled peasants with ruined bodies in the same Cherdyn hospital where Mandelstam is treated; a desperate letter from a peasant woman begging Stalin to “kill us completely” rather than let the family be slowly tortured in exile; the destruction of trust in society by mass recruitment of informers and fear of the Lubyanka’s summons. It also traces Pasternak’s uneasy fascination with Stalin, his brief rise in status after the famous phone call, and his relief when Stalin later publicly proclaims Mayakovsky the foremost Soviet poet, allowing Pasternak to retreat into “modest quiet.”

The final lines return to Mandelstam’s end: a second arrest under Yezhov, death under Beria. On the way to Magadan he is already a “complete wreck,” left in the “Second River” transit camp in a state of madness. Convinced he is to be poisoned, he refuses his own food and steals others’ rations; they beat him until they realise he is insane, then throw him out of the barrack. He lives by the rubbish pits, scavenging scraps, still composing poetry that no one writes down. His Stalin epigram, “The Highlander,” remains, to this day, the only major poem directly dedicated to Stalin — and the attempt to bend its author to the regime’s purposes has ended in physical and spiritual annihilation.

1934 - Osip Mandelstam

1934 is the year of two historic congresses, tightly bound together.
One of them is the 17th Congress of the VKP(b), known as the “Congress of Victors.” It opens on 26 January. In his main report, Stalin says:

“Marxism has achieved this: it has won complete victory in one-sixth of the world. The decisive successes of socialism in all branches of the economy and culture are obvious. The Party’s general line has won along the whole front.”

Two years later, in 1936, these conclusions will be included in the preamble to the Stalin Constitution. In Moscow, people are already talking about a new constitution in the autumn of 1934. The writer and journalist Ilya Ehrenburg recalls: “November 1934: they said that at the forthcoming Congress of Soviets a draft of the new constitution would be discussed.”

Stalin’s constitution will be written by Bukharin. Two years before his execution, Bukharin writes into the text: “Socialism in the USSR has triumphed completely and irrevocably.” In other words, humanity’s eternal dream of a radiant future has come true. There is nothing more to dream of, and one is no longer allowed to dream of anything else.

Nadezhda Mandelstam, wife of the poet Osip Mandelstam, writes: “I maintain that we are all in a condition close to hypnotic sleep. We have really been persuaded that we have entered a new era, and that our only task is to submit to historical necessity which, incidentally, coincides with the dreams of the fighters for human happiness. People have been deprived of will and independent judgement.”

An old acquaintance says to Mandelstam: “Don’t you understand that now everything is different?” First of all, this concerns questions of personal honour and decency. Secondly, the conviction that “now everything is different” explains the violence of the authorities and forces one to acquiesce, to accept it as inevitable.

Besides, practically everyone believes that “out there,” beyond the borders of the USSR, things are even worse than here. But soon Soviet power will move beyond its borders, spread over most of the world, and everywhere will be the same. That is historical predestination. A typical conversation at the time ran like this: “We at least sometimes get a bit of herring, or some sugar, or a little kerosene… But in the capitalist countries? There you must just perish!”

In January 1934, 1,966 delegates listen to Stalin’s report on the victory of socialism. 1,108 of them will be repressed in the coming years. Of 139 members and candidate members of the Central Committee, 41 will survive.

In 1934, even before the beginning of the Great Terror, mothers are already teaching their small children to speak the new language that adults speak. Pasternak’s wife, Zinaida Nikolaevna, used to say: “My boys love Stalin more than anyone, and then me only after him.” Everyone wants their children to survive. No one shares their doubts or anxieties with their children. Out of these children completely new people are growing up.

On 17 August, the other historic congress of 1934 opens: the First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers. At the entrance to the Columned Hall, there are crowds of people. Everyone wants to see the writers live. The most unexpected delegations enter inside: from reserve naval officers of Osoaviakhim to the icon painters of Palekh. Pioneers from the “Snub-Nosed Base,” metro builders, kolkhozniks from Uzbekistan. Representatives of the Saami people of the Kola Peninsula report on the calving of female reindeer. A shock-worker kolkhoznik, Comrade Chaban, addresses Sholokhov: “I really want Lukerya, who is always fawning on her husband, to become a shock-worker of kolkhoz production.”

The potential participants in the congress had begun to be discussed as early as 1932. Among the non-party writers considered were Babel, Platonov, Klyuev, Erdman, Pasternak. Next to their names, in brackets, were listed works regarded as seditious. For 1932, the list of admitted non-party writers includes the poet Osip Mandelstam.

Maria Vishnyakova, mother of the director Andrei Tarkovsky and first wife of the poet Arseny Tarkovsky, recalls: “I was standing on the staircase in the Herzen Literary Institute. Suddenly I felt a sharp pain in my arm. It was Tarkovsky who had gripped my arm so hard and said in a strangled voice: ‘Look, Mandelstam is coming.’”

By the turn of the 1930s, Osip Mandelstam had already written everything that would give many contemporaries and descendants the right to call him the strongest Russian poet of the twentieth century.

He has no permanent place of residence. For a long time he lives wherever he can, with acquaintances in Leningrad. Then for several years he lodges in various corners in Moscow. In January 1932, he and his wife are given a ten-square-metre room in the Herzen House, i.e. in the dormitory of the Literary Institute. Ragged wallpaper. Swarms of bedbugs. Revolted by the bedbugs, Mandelstam decides to shave his wife’s head. Someone objects: “But that will look terrible.” Mandelstam replies: “In general I like a rough aesthetic.”

Later, there in the Literary Institute, they are given a slightly larger little room. And into the ten-metre one moves a certain beginning poet with his wife and child. The wife of this young poet used to run out into the corridor, shouting that her husband was a young poet, while Mandelstam was an old man who no longer wrote, and even if he sometimes wrote, he was in any case a former poet, outdated.

And then suddenly, in October 1933, Mandelstam is given an apartment in one of the first cooperative writers’ houses, 3/5 Nashchyokinsky Lane. They do not know who put up the money for the apartment, but cannot fail to guess that it is an advance. An advance from the authorities.

In November, Mandelstam writes the poem “The Apartment”:

And the cursed walls are so thin,
There’s nowhere left to run,
And I, like a fool on a comb,
Am obliged to play for someone.

The walls of the apartment are lined with felt for insulation. As a result, the flat is full of moths. Visitors catch them by clapping their hands. The felt, meanwhile, does not at all save one from excellent audibility. And it is in this apartment with excellent audibility that, a month after moving in, Osip Mandelstam writes the poem “The Highlander”:

We live, not feeling the country beneath our feet,
Our words can’t be heard ten steps away,
But wherever there’s enough for half a phrase,
They’ll remember the Kremlin highlander.

His thick fingers are fat like worms,
And his words are as heavy as ten-pound weights,

Cockroach moustaches laugh,
And the tops of his boots glitter.

Around him, a rabble of thin-necked leaders,
He plays with the services of half-men.
One whistles, one mews, one whimpers,
He alone booms and pokes,

He hammers out decree after decree, like horseshoes:
To one in the groin, to one in the forehead, to one in the eyebrow, to one in the eye.
Every execution is a berry for him,
And the broad chest of the Ossetian.

Osip Mandelstam not only wrote this poem. He began to read it aloud. His friend, the biologist Boris Kuzin, recalls: “One morning Osip Emilievich ran in to me, highly agitated, but cheerful. He read me the poem about Stalin. After a pause of stupefaction, I asked if he had read it to anyone else. ‘To no one. You are the first. Well, of course, Nadya.’ I begged him not to read it to anyone else. In response there was very merry, delighted laughter — but he did, nevertheless, promise not to read the poem to anyone else.”

Right afterwards Mandelstam reads “The Highlander” to a friend of the family, Emma Gerstein. He reads it and adds: “Look — to no one. If it gets out, they can shoot me.” And he adds: “The Komsomol lads will sing this in every street! In the Bolshoi Theatre… at congresses… from all the galleries.”

He read “The Highlander” to Pasternak during a walk somewhere around the Tverskaya-Yamskaya streets. Pasternak said: “What you have read to me has nothing to do with literature, with poetry. It is not a literary fact, but an act of suicide, which I cannot approve. And in which I do not want to take part. You have read me nothing, I have heard nothing, and I ask you not to read it to anyone else.”

Two days later, Mandelstam came again to Kuzin. Kuzin recalls: “Osip Emilievich, with the sweetest smile, as if he’d just eaten a slice of a wonderful cake, told me: ‘I read the poem to Boris Leonidovich.’”

Two years before he wrote “The Highlander,” at the home of Emma Gerstein, Mandelstam had started a conversation with her father, a member of the consulting group of the Kremlin Hospital. Mandelstam was seeing him for the first time. The conversation took place in Dr. Gerstein’s flat in the Semashko Hospital. From behind the door of the consulting room came: “He can’t think of anything himself. The embodiment of an uncreative principle. A parasite type.” There was no doubt that Mandelstam was saying all this about Stalin. Afterwards Dr. Gerstein said to his daughter: “Listen, your Mandelstam is a perfect child. He said the wildest things. Like baby talk.”

In December 1933, Osip Mandelstam recites “The Highlander” to acquaintances right on the boulevard. In February 1934, he is walking along Gogol Boulevard with Anna Akhmatova. Akhmatova recalls: “Osip said: ‘I am ready for death.’”

In early September 1932, while living in the Literary Institute dormitory, Mandelstam demanded that his neighbour, the Armenian poet Amir Sargidjan, return the 75 roubles he’d long owed him. Sargidjan’s real name was Sergei Borodin. In the early 1930s in Moscow there was great official demand for representatives of the “national literatures,” and many young writers from the Russian

provinces, for career reasons, took Armenian, Georgian or Tajik pseudonyms. So, from Borodin–Sargidjan, Mandelstam demanded his 75 roubles back. The thing was, Mandelstam had seen through the window how Sargidjan's wife was walking across the courtyard of the Institute carrying a basket of groceries and two bottles of wine. At that time in Moscow everything was on ration cards, and there she was with such luxury in her basket. Osip Emilievich shouted through the whole yard: "Look, the young poet refuses to repay his debt to an older comrade, and yet he invites guests and drinks wine with them." A row began. In the heat of the argument, the poet Sargidjan's wife demanded that her husband beat up Mandelstam. Sargidjan laid into Mandelstam with his fists. He hit Mandelstam's wife as well.

The Mandelstams demanded a comrades' court. Comrades' courts are very fashionable. In the Soviet consciousness of those years, the comrades' court is quite a sufficient means of defending one's honour, which, in terms of passion and spectacle, fully replaces a duel. The writer Alexei Tolstoy presided. Before the hearing he had been instructed that leniency was required towards the young national poet, who was moreover a Party member. The young poet was obliged to return the money if possible. But the beating of Mandelstam's wife did not incur any censure from the court.

The ridiculous Mandelstam understood this Soviet communal squabble in a Pushkinian way: his wife had been insulted, and this demanded revenge. But in the USSR a Pushkin situation cannot be resolved à la Pushkin. The issue is not a duel, but the impossibility of defending one's dignity at all. Later on, no one will even think of defending their own wives. The wives will be sent to camps, while their high-ranking husbands will quietly enjoy all the material privileges of their position. Stalin will impressively seal this state of affairs in 1937, when the centenary of Pushkin's death is celebrated solemnly and festively on an all-Union scale. Everyone must learn: first — Pushkin is dead; second — the Pushkin code of honour is buried with him forever.

By the spring of 1934, it becomes clear that Mandelstam has no intention of parting with Pushkinian notions of honour. Revenge for his wife has become an idée fixe. His hatred has concentrated on the figure of the chairman of the comrades' court, Alexei Tolstoy. Mandelstam dreams of slapping Tolstoy's face. He involves in the affair the not-yet-imprisoned Lev Gumilyov, son of Anna Akhmatova and of Nikolai Gumilyov, who had been shot in 1921. The two of them hang about near Tolstoy's mansion, next to Gorky's house at the Nikitsky Gate. When Gumilyov spots Tolstoy, he is to give Mandelstam a signal. That time it doesn't work out.

At the end of April 1934, the Mandelstams travel to Leningrad. In early May, in the offices of the Writers' Publishing House, Mandelstam slaps Alexei Tolstoy. "That's for your comrades' court," he says.

The incident becomes widely known. The well-known poet Peretz Markish comments: "Oh, a Jew has slapped a count." Gorky also speaks out: "We'll show him how to beat Russian writers." This remark by Gorky, preserved in memoirs, says a lot about the authorities and about Gorky himself. Gorky had always been a fervent fighter against antisemitism. If in 1934 he stoops to it, then the jaws of the vice are clamped tight.

They come for Mandelstam in the night of 13 to 14 May 1934. Akhmatova, who is staying with the Mandelstams, witnesses the arrest. The warrant is signed by the deputy head of the OGPU, Yakov Agranov, a lover of literature and former friend of Mayakovsky. The grounds for arrest: the poems "The Highlander," "The Apartment," and also the poem "Cold Spring," written in the Crimea in 1933. In connection with this poem, the interrogation record of 25 May 1934 contains the following

statement by Mandelstam: “In my political consciousness and social state there is a deep depression. The social background of this depression is the liquidation of the kulaks as a class. My perception of this process is expressed in my poem ‘Cold Spring.’”

The day after Mandelstam’s arrest, Anna Akhmatova goes to Pasternak. Pasternak goes to Bukharin, then editor-in-chief of *Izvestia*. Akhmatova reaches the secretary of the Central Executive Committee, Abel Yenukidze. He listens to her and does not say a word. Akhmatova goes to the writer Lydia Seifullina, who phones a Chekist she knows. “If only they don’t drive him insane there,” says the Chekist. “Our people are great masters at that.”

They do drive Mandelstam insane. A severe mental disorder with auditory hallucinations. In 1934, doctors are not surprised by this. A woman doctor in exile tells Mandelstam’s wife, when she demands a medical examination: “What do you want from me? They all come ‘from there’ in this condition.” And she advises her not to send Mandelstam to any sort of medical institution: “They’ll destroy him there. You know how things are in such places here.” Another doctor later, at his place of exile, explains that such mental states arise after a few weeks, sometimes even a few days of detention. Mandelstam asks him why people now fall gravely ill after a few days in the internal prison, whereas before they would sit for many years in a fortress and come out healthy. The doctor merely throws up his hands.

Because of his naturally high excitability, the poet Mandelstam was easy prey for the investigators, and no particularly refined methods were needed. They used the standard ones: sleep deprivation. Interrogations at night. Most of the time is not spent in interrogation itself, but in waiting for it at the investigator’s door. During the interrogation they shine a bright light in his eyes. They feed him salty food. They give him nothing to drink. When Mandelstam asks for water, they put him in a straitjacket and drag him off to the punishment cell.

In Mandelstam’s cell there is a second man, a plant. He tells him that all Mandelstam’s close ones and acquaintances have already been arrested, that all will be charged with terrorism and conspiracy. One morning, this man returns to the cell later than Mandelstam, allegedly from an interrogation. Mandelstam notices that he smells of onions and tells him so at once. The plant is immediately removed.

This is still socialist humanism of the 1934 model. Closer to 1937 there will be no single cells at all, with or without plants. Very soon, “singles” will be crammed full, and people will stand on their feet in them for days at a time.

Mandelstam is not interested in who denounced him. He is a man of his time, which is to say that he knows very well that thousands and thousands of different people are constantly being dragged to the Lubyanka — as they said in 1934, “they drag everyone.”

With these countless men and women, in special flats, conversations are held and they are required to inform the organs about the thoughts and moods of their acquaintances and neighbours. They are promised protection. They are intimidated. To Mandelstam’s friend, the biologist Kuzin, they say: “Your mother won’t survive it if we arrest you.” He replies that he wishes his mother dead. His interlocutor flies into a rage, yells: “We’ll spread rumours that we’ve recruited you, and you won’t be able to look people in the face.”

Alongside the gathering of information, another, probably more important goal is achieved. People lose trust in one another. Everyone in Moscow knows about the invitations to the Lubyanka. The

same happens in the provinces. People stop socialising, fall silent, normal ties are broken, society weakens. And it weakens completely. By 1934 this is already a fait accompli. In precisely this state Soviet society will approach 1937.

At his very first interrogation, Mandelstam admits to authorship of the incriminated poems. The investigator wants to know what prompted him to write them. Mandelstam answers: “What I hate most of all is fascism.” The investigator demands that Mandelstam recite the poem about Stalin. Mandelstam recites it.

The investigator is Nikolai Khristoforovich Shivarov — in retrospect, Mandelstam calls him Khristoforych. Khristoforych oversees literature in the OGPU and belongs to that part of the Chekists who are fond of literature. So the interrogation of a great poet gives him refined pleasure. Khristoforych says to Mandelstam during the interrogation: “You told me that for a poet the feeling of fear is extremely useful — it helps generate verses. Well, now you will receive the full measure of that stimulating feeling.” Chekist Khristoforych has not understood the poet. The fear that accompanies the writing of poems has nothing in common with fear of the OGPU. Mandelstam often repeated: “When primitive fear of violence and terror appears, the other, the main, mysterious fear — fear before being itself — disappears. With the Revolution, which before our eyes shed torrents of blood, that fear disappeared.”

At Khristoforych’s demand, Mandelstam writes out the poem “The Highlander.” The investigator attaches the poet’s manuscript to the case file. Mandelstam’s investigator, Nikolai Shivarov, will be shot in 1938.

In 1934, precisely while the investigation into Mandelstam’s poems is underway, rumours spread in Moscow that the Prosecutor General, Vyshinsky, is starting to dig under the NKVD chief, Yagoda. Some people take these rumours as encouraging, believing that Vyshinsky, as a trained lawyer, will put an end to the arbitrary rule of the security organs.

In line with the peculiarities of human memory, people at this point forget how unequivocally terrifying Vyshinsky has already shown himself to be in the trials of the late 1920s and early 1930s. Moreover, public consciousness in the first half of the 1930s stubbornly refuses to see what is happening as a struggle among groups in power for the right to dispose without restraint of the lives and deaths of Soviet citizens. The unlimited and extremely harsh exploitation of the country’s human resources is the foundation of Stalin’s economy — that is, this exploitation is the basis of the Stalinist regime and of Stalin’s personal power.

As for the citizens, in 1934 none of them thinks that a new wave of terror lies ahead and will inevitably come.

Only the sick poet Osip Mandelstam, in 1934, sees in his investigator what no sane person could have detected. In exile, he will say to his wife that “in all the behaviour of the investigator, despite the shouting and threats, there was a certain ambiguity, and there emerged a hatred of Stalin.” Khristoforych knew what the system had in store for him. He knew that his death would not be instantaneous, that he would one day long for death. The sick Mandelstam, during his own interrogation, perceived his investigator’s most intimate fear.

The first thing taken from Mandelstam at the Lubyanka is his belt. His trousers fall down. He keeps hitching them up in a ludicrous way.

Mandelstam is seen at the Lubyanka by Pyotr Pavlenko, a Soviet writer. He even rides up in the lift with Mandelstam when the latter is being taken to another interrogation. Mandelstam, in a fit of nerves, collapses and cowers in a corner. The Soviet writer Pavlenko says reproachfully: "Mandelstam, Mandelstam, you should be ashamed."

Pavlenko is a friend of the investigator Khristoforych. The latter invites him, as a friend, to attend Mandelstam's interrogation. Pavlenko accepts the invitation, among other reasons, as he says, in order to "gather artistic impressions."

In the investigator's office at the Lubyanka there are several identical doors. Some lead to special trap-cupboards, in case someone tries to flee. Others serve as a back exit for the master of the office. Writer Pavlenko observes the interrogation of Mandelstam while sitting in one of these special cupboards. It is hard to say how fruitful the artistic impressions of writer Pavlenko were during the interrogation of poet Mandelstam, but politically he misread the situation completely. In May 1934, Stalin does not want Mandelstam's death. He has designs on this particular poet. By the strictest standards, Mandelstam is already a Poet with a capital P. In Russia, where there is Pushkin, the mere title of "poet" is already more than high enough praise. Besides, Osip Mandelstam is a poet of the Silver Age with old pre-revolutionary roots. That matters to Stalin. Back in the unforgettable days of the Petersburg artistic club The Stray Dog, it was precisely there that Anna Akhmatova said: "Mandelstam is, of course, our foremost poet." And at that time there were many to choose from. Stalin could not care less that by 1934 few in the Soviet literary milieu valued Mandelstam. He knew perfectly well the worth of all assessments. It must be said that even at other times, audiences were unable to accept Mandelstam. In 1920, under Wrangel in Crimea, in Theodosia, the local literary-artistic circle organised an evening in his honour. He came out with his hand tucked into his jacket, threw back his little birdlike head and began to read. Sniggers were heard in the auditorium. Then open, coarse laughter. An eyewitness, Andrei Sedykh, later editor-in-chief of New York's *Novoe Russkoe Slovo*, recalls: "I still remember with shame how our audience behaved that evening. People laughed at what they could not understand. Mandelstam stopped, stamped his foot. The laughter grew louder. 'Barbarians!' he shouted, and left the stage. Maximilian Voloshin consoled him and said that the rabble shouldn't understand a poet."

In 1933, Stalin did not laugh at Mandelstam's "Highlander," because he undoubtedly rated it highly. It was the first serious poetic work dedicated to him, written by perhaps the strongest of the living poets. The negative attitude of the author is irrelevant in such a case. One can work to change the author's sign from minus to plus, when it is such an author. Moreover, even with an obvious minus sign, Stalin read in "The Highlander" the main thing for himself: his power is absolute.

Most likely, against the background of the "Highlander" affair, Stalin decided to acquaint himself more broadly with the poet's work. In that case, the Mandelstam line of 1931 obviously did not escape him: "It's stifling, but still one wants to live to death." Stalin tore this line out of its context and made his decision: "Live and write. You know what I expect from you. Your incomparable pen, Mandelstam, will leave my image in history."

The 1931 poem from which Stalin plucked the line is about doom — the eternal expectation of execution at dawn. After the internal prison of the Lubyanka, that poem became Mandelstam's life. And his illness. After the Lubyanka, for all his remaining short life, with the rarest clear intervals, every day at six in the morning he waits to be shot. He curls up in a corner, shakes, screams that they are coming to take him to be shot. In exile in Cherdyn, he will, at that hour, jump out of the

hospital window. From the second floor. He will fall clumsily onto a soft flowerbed, lie there, curled up. Orderlies will haul him back upstairs, cursing. After the jump, calm will come. In his verse he will put it like this: “The jump — and I am in my right mind.” In his madness, he understood correctly what awaited him. In moments of lucidity, he lost his sense of reality and began to believe in his own safety.

There is nothing in Cherdyn with which to treat Mandelstam. To free him from the daily expectation of execution, they simply put the clocks forward by two hours. He sees that it is eight o’clock and no one has come for him. And he calms down.

Sometimes he wakes up in the middle of the night and tells his wife that Anna Andreyevna Akhmatova has been arrested and is now being taken for interrogation. When he walks around Cherdyn, he looks for Akhmatova’s corpse in the ravines.

In the same Cherdyn hospital where Mandelstam is, there are many exiled peasants. They are there with suppurating ulcers, broken limbs, bodies ruined by lifting unbearable loads. The north of the Perm region, where Cherdyn lies, is in 1934 a thoroughly camp area. Trainload after trainload of peasants torn from their land have been driven here. Here they lie buried.

The wife of one of these men writes a letter to Stalin. The letter is intercepted by the local GPU. “Comrade Stalin, I am a poor peasant woman. We were counted in the village as the very poorest, our house was rickety and no good. They took everything from us and exiled us. We have four children, the eldest is 9, the youngest 2. Order that we be killed completely. If they had just killed us outright, it would have been better than tormenting us like this. Forgive me, a poor woman. Peasant woman Yelena Fedoseyeva.”

Women in exile are not taken on for light work. You can’t get a job even as a washer-up.

In early June 1934 — the exact date is unknown, but most likely around the 7th–8th — Nikolai Bukharin writes a letter to Stalin. The third point of this letter is entitled “On the poet Mandelstam”: “I have received a despairing telegram from Mandelstam’s wife, saying that he is mentally disturbed, tried to throw himself out of a window, etc. My assessment of Osip Mandelstam: he is a first-rate poet, but he is absolutely out of date. As I do not know what he has done or in what he has gone astray, I decided to write to you. Greetings, yours, Nikolai.”

In the postscript to the letter, again about Mandelstam: “Boris Pasternak is in a state of complete derangement because of Mandelstam’s arrest, and nobody knows anything.”

Bukharin wrote to the one correct address where they knew about Mandelstam’s fate. By the time his letter reached him, Stalin had already decided what to do with the poet’s life. The sentence had been revised. The three-year exile in Cherdyn was replaced by what was called “minus twelve”: a ban on living in Moscow, Leningrad and ten other large cities of the USSR. This is an incredible mitigation, fantastical for the author of “The Highlander.”

On Bukharin’s letter Stalin wrote in his own hand: “Who gave them the right to arrest Mandelstam? Outrageous…” The remark is very interesting, especially because the document has none of the required incoming and outgoing registration marks. That is, no one saw Stalin’s note. It was not intended for subordinates. It is acting, to relieve boredom. “They arrested Mandelstam! Disgraceful!” Stalin is joking, Stalin is amusing himself. Later, Stalin will phone Pasternak.

On 13 June 1934, in Boris Pasternak's flat at 14 Volkhonka Street, their famous conversation with Stalin begins. Stalin says that instructions have been given, that everything will be all right with Mandelstam, and asks why Pasternak did not intercede for him. "If a friend of mine got into trouble," Stalin says, "I would climb the wall to save him." Pasternak replies that if he had not interceded, Stalin would not have known about the case. Stalin asks: "But he is your friend, isn't he?" There is a pause. Stalin continues: "But he is a master, a master, isn't he?" Pasternak answers: "That is not the point. Why are we talking all the time about Mandelstam, about Mandelstam? I have long wanted to talk with you," says Pasternak. "About what?" asks Stalin. "About life and death," says Pasternak. Stalin hangs up.

In Cherdyn, the telegram from Moscow about the change in the sentence arrives on 14 June. The commandant cannot believe his eyes, sends a request to Moscow and only then is convinced that the telegram really is from the government. Mandelstam is told to choose a city to live in. He suddenly remembers that the father of an acquaintance, the biologist Leonov, worked as a prison doctor in Voronezh. "Who knows, a prison doctor may still come in handy," says Mandelstam, and chooses Voronezh.

On the way to Voronezh, the Mandelstams spend a few hours in Moscow. Nadezhda Mandelstam runs to Bukharin. He refuses to see her. By then, Bukharin already knows the reason for Mandelstam's arrest. He has met with Genrikh Yagoda, and Yagoda has recited to him Mandelstam's "The Highlander." The head of the NKVD knew it by heart.

In the summer of 1935, talking with an acquaintance in the small park near the monument to the poet Alexei Koltsov, the exiled Osip Mandelstam asks: "What do you think, will there ever be a monument to me in Voronezh?"

At the Congress of Soviet Writers in August 1934, Bukharin in his report names Boris Pasternak the foremost Soviet poet. Bukharin speaks for over three hours. The report is complex, tasteful, with Latin tags dropped in without translation. Pasternak sits on the presidium. On behalf of the Writers' Union, he accepts a portrait of Stalin.

Pasternak's brief stay in the Soviet official limelight is a consequence of his telephone conversation with Stalin about Mandelstam. Already a few hours after that conversation, the whole of Moscow knows about Stalin's phone call. Pasternak's wife, Zinaida, recalls: "In the Writers' Union everything turned upside down. In the restaurant they began to serve us with special attention, to the point that when Borya invited needy writers to our table, it was the Writers' Union that paid for their meals."

Strangely enough, it is Stalin who will free Pasternak from this impossible situation. In December 1935, Stalin declares Mayakovsky "the best and most talented poet of our Soviet epoch." This allows Pasternak to write Stalin the following letter: "I warmly thank you for your words about Mayakovsky. Indirectly, your lines about him have had a saving effect on me. Lately, under the influence of the West, they puffed me up terribly. I even fell ill from it. Now that you have placed Mayakovsky in first place, I can with an easy heart live and work as before in modest quiet."

A close friend of the Mandelstam family, Emma Gerstein, writes that the last flare-up of Pasternak's psychic enthralment with Stalin's personality came in 1936. Kornei Chukovsky recalls their visit together to the 10th Komsomol Congress in 1936: "Yesterday at the congress I was sitting in the sixth row. I looked back. Boris Pasternak. I took him to the front rows. Suddenly Kaganovich, Voroshilov, Zhdanov and Stalin appear. What happened to the hall! And HE stood there, a little

tired, pensive. Just to see him — simply to see him — was happiness for us all. When they applauded him, he took out his watch — a silver one — and showed it to the audience with a delightful smile. We all whispered: 'The watch, the watch, Stalin showed his watch.' We walked home together with Pasternak, and we both were drunk with our joy."

At the Writers' Congress in 1934, Stalin does not appear. He is in the South. But he regularly receives information from the Secret-Political Department of the Main Directorate of State Security of the NKVD of the USSR. The NKVD had from the start been the main organisation preparing the writers' congress. In every delegation there are "creative workers" who work for the organs. Reports on the mood in the writers' milieu come in regularly.

Despite Gorky's efforts, the Siberian writer Vladimir Zazubrin is not admitted to the board of the Writers' Union. In 1923 he had written a novella entitled "The Slit" ("Shchepka" / "Chekha" — usually translated as *The Chekist*). In 1992, a film titled *The Chekist* was made from it. A short fragment from the novella:

"The three of them fired like automatons. Their eyes were empty, with a dead, glassy shine. They waited until the condemned had taken off their clothes, stood in line, mechanically raised their revolvers, fired, stepped back. They waited until the corpses were removed and the next ones were brought in."

Writer Vladimir Zazubrin was shot in 1938.

On 20 August 1934, the deputy head of the Secret-Political Department, Comrade Lyushkov, reports to NKVD chief Yagoda about a leaflet distributed at the congress: "So far nine copies have been found. It is written in pencil through carbon paper, in block letters. We are checking the handwriting against the delegates' forms. I attach a copy of the leaflet." The leaflet is addressed to the foreign guests of the congress:

"We, Russian writers, resemble prostitutes in a brothel, with only this difference: they sell their bodies, while we sell our souls. There is no way out of the brothel for us. Our families are held responsible for our conduct. We do not speak at home as we think, because in the USSR there is a circular system of denunciation. You set up committees for saving the victims of fascism, but why do we not see your efforts to save the victims of our Soviet fascism, carried out by Stalin?"

Just while the writers' congress is in progress, in the settlement of Peredelkino near Moscow, construction and allocation of the first writers' dachas begin. The journalist Mikhail Koltsov jokes at the congress: "Alexei Maximovich Gorky has opened five vacancies for geniuses and forty-five for very talented writers. The carving-up has already begun."

In those days at the congress, Jurgis Baltrushaitis draws attention — a poet of the Silver Age, in 1934 ambassador of independent Lithuania. He begs that Mandelstam be saved. He finds nothing better than to adjure the Soviet writers by the memory of the executed poet Gumilyov. Back in 1921, Baltrushaitis had urged Mandelstam to take Lithuanian citizenship. It was possible — Mandelstam had been born in Warsaw.

He even gathered some papers, but then changed his mind. He said that one cannot escape one's fate, and that one should not even try.

During the congress, and for two and a bit years after it, Mandelstam will be in Voronezh. There he will write a quarter of everything he ever wrote. At first he has the possibility to work in the

Voronezh Theatre and at the local radio committee. Then he is fired. His wife comes to the Voronezh Writers' Union to ask for financial help. The decision: refuse.

At the beginning of 1937, without work and without money, Mandelstam writes the "Ode to Stalin." He composes it, for the first time, not in the way he had written everything before. Anna Andreyevna Akhmatova said that when her famous *Poem Without a Hero* began to grow inside her, she fell ill with it so painfully that she wanted to get rid of it, be freed from it. She was ready to do anything, even to throw herself into housework, but nothing helped. Mandelstam knew that complex feeling, close to hallucination. But it had nothing to do with the writing of the "Ode to Stalin." For the first time in his life, Mandelstam lays out pencils and paper on the table. He sits down and takes a pencil in his hand. Half an hour later he jumps up and curses himself for lack of skill.

It is recalled that once, in 1937 in Voronezh, he dashed across the street to a public telephone, dialled a number, began to read verses, then suddenly shouted angrily to someone: "No, listen, there is no one else I can read to!" Mandelstam was reading to a high-ranking NKVD official to whom he was attached. He was reading his "Ode to Stalin." The man listening at the other end of the line was the head of the NKVD Directorate for the Voronezh region, Semyon Dukelsky. In 1938 he would be appointed head of the USSR Committee for Cinematography. Before the revolution he had worked as a cinema pianist. In 1937, Dukelsky did not understand the "Ode to Stalin" read to him over the phone. It contained much brilliant literary craft, but it lacked the main thing Stalin expected from Mandelstam: it had none of the stamp and simplicity of "The Highlander"; it would never lodge in the ear. An informer could not write it down from memory. It was not "of the people."

Stalin had given Mandelstam three years of life for the attempt. The attempt failed. The time ran out.

Osip Mandelstam's poem "The Highlander" remains to this day the only serious poetic work dedicated to Joseph Stalin.

Mandelstam will be arrested a second time under Yezhov. He will die under Beria.

He became a complete wreck already on the way to Magadan. He was left in the transit camp "Second River." He was insane. He suspected that an order had come from Moscow to poison him. He refused food, stole other people's rations, convinced that theirs were not poisoned. For this they beat him, until they realised he was mad. Then they threw him out of the barrack. He lived by the rubbish pits, picking up scraps. According to surviving witnesses, he composed verses to the very end. He recited them, people heard them, but no one wrote them down.