

INTERVIEW ON ANNA AKHMATOVA

This text is based on a translation by Helen Rappaport of a [complete transcript](#) (made by Robin Hessman from a videotape) of an unedited interview filmed in April 1989 at Berlin's Oxford home, Headington House. The interviewer, the late Vsevolod Georgievich Shishkovsky, was London correspondent of Russian State TV and Radio. Excerpts from the interview (here identified in red where known) were used on Russian TV: see [catalogue of broadcasts](#), items 80 and 80a. The late Elena Tsezarenva Chukovskaya was also present, and joins in at the end.

VSEVOLOD SHISHKOVSKY In our country the one hundredth anniversary of the birth of our famous poetess Anna Akhmatova is being widely celebrated. And at the moment, we are attempting, literally, to the *n*th degree, to gather together everything connected with her life, her work, her encounters, and I think that your reminiscences of those meetings with her have an absolutely priceless significance, and I know that you are well acquainted with the work of Anna Akhmatova, and that you met her. And so, might you recount your first meeting with her?

ISAIAH BERLIN You called her a poetess. She despised that word. She called herself a poet. She did not acknowledge any poetesses, neither herself, nor Tsvetaeva, nor others. This is incidental. But I remember it. She was very angry about it, she said: 'Yes, yes, they call me a poetess', she said this in a very angry tone. I wrote an article about it,¹ which appeared in English, and which has now been translated into Russian.² It's all probably very clearly

¹ 'Meetings with Russian Writers in 1945 and 1956', in PI.

² 'Vstrechi s russkimi pisatelyami 1945 i 1956', trans. D. Segal, E. Tolstaya-Segal and O. Ronen, with the help of the author, in L. Fleishman, O. Ronen and D. Segal (eds), *Slavica Hierosolymitana: Slavic Studies of the Hebrew University* 5–6 (Jerusalem, 1981: Magnes Press, Hebrew University), 593–641; repr. in *Istorija svobody: Rossiya* (Moscow, 2001: Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie). A second translation appeared

explained there, and I have nothing new, really, to add to it. But if you would ask me some questions, I will try to answer them.

VS I simply wanted to know ... what did you make of her, what kind of conversation did you have with her, to what extent was she, so to say, confiding and ...

IB It was all very long drawn out. It's all there in my account, you know, indeed I met her quite by chance. I went into ... there was a shop, called the House of Books,³ in Leningrad on the Nevsky Prospekt. There, you know, they gave ... as I was a diplomat at the British Embassy, it was common knowledge of course, that I was allowed into the morning room, and not ... could not buy books in the shops. And there I simply looked at books and chatted. I met a [Soviet] citizen – at that time it was possible to talk freely – and I chatted with him. His name was Orlov, I doubt if he is still alive.⁴ He had, I think, written books on Griboedov and Blok. Well, I just asked him various things: who had survived, who not, during the blockade; he told me that various people had died in a variety of ways, and somehow or other I mentioned the name of Akhmatova. I had not heard anything of her in England, that is, nobody knew whether she was even alive.⁵ He said: 'You mean Anna Andreevna? But she lives only a short distance from here. Would you like to visit her?' It was as though, somehow or other, somebody had told me that some poetess or other of the nineteenth century, how I don't know, who – that there really were Russian poetesses of the nineteenth century.⁶

VS And you went to see her that very same evening?

subsequently: 'Vstrechi s russkimi pisatelyami v 1945 i 1956 godakh', trans. N. I. Tolstoy, *Zvezda*, 1990 no. 2 (February), 129–57.

³ The Writers' Bookshop.

⁴ The critic Vladimir Nikolaevich Orlov (1908–85).

⁵ IB had in fact written to Maurice Bowra on 7 June 1945: 'Akhmatova lives in Leningrad and is very inaccessible on account of being a survival of an older day, although not exactly a Fascist beast' (L1 574).

⁶ i.e. that a C19th poetess was still alive: 'It was as if I had suddenly been invited to meet Miss Christina Rossetti' (PI3 400–1).

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IB We went straight away, straight away. I'll simply relate the whole story, for what it's worth, but I don't mind, I'll tell it again. It's a strange story. We went to the Fontanny Dom, went up the stairs, entered her apartment. She was not alone. He had telephoned her, I think, to say we were coming. Some friend of hers was there also. I went in, bowed to her, she stood there adopting a magisterial pose. I did not know what to say, I was embarrassed – and in order to come out with something or other, I said to her 'I am very glad to see you. They will be very glad to know in the West that you are still alive, that you are OK, that you still live, they will be very glad.' She said: 'So they should, there's an article about me in the *Dublin Review* and also there's a thesis, a doctorate at the University of Bologna.' I bowed. She bowed. Then we started talking, but it was somewhat strained, for some reason or other the conversation did not flow. She had no idea who I was, Orlov hadn't said a word [about] what I was there for, and what this was all about, and so it went on, perhaps, for eight minutes, we exchanged various general platitudes, even about the weather. Then suddenly I heard my name, someone shouting my name, coming from somewhere below.

VS From the street?

IB Yes. I couldn't imagine what it was ... [they were shouting] in English. I couldn't think what it was, and decided that I must be imagining it, and did not pay any attention to it. Then it began to get louder and louder. I simply had to go to the window and look. There I saw a man — Randolph Churchill. It was like a nightmare, do you see? The most unexpected thing in the world. I knew him, but not particularly well. We were the same age.⁷ I had met him in Oxford, maybe three times in my life. He wasn't an old friend, but he shouted out my name. He was clearly drunk, stood there yelling like a student, but I was already greatly alarmed and I thought: 'My God, if he sees me, he'll come up the stairs. He shouldn't be allowed to do that.' I ran down, you know, rushed straight down there, and the unfortunate Orlov followed, not understanding what was going on. Akhmatova didn't either. I took him off, away from there. He was a journalist for some American organisation or other, I think, for the North American Newspaper Alliance, which

⁷ Berlin was born in 1909, Churchill in 1911.

called itself NANA, something or other, I don't know, a group of journalists, it's the offices of some journalists, and he came, under its auspices, first to Moscow, and then Leningrad. And they gave him some caviare. And he couldn't speak Russian. He needed someone to translate for him into Russian that he wanted this caviare put on ice. That's all he wanted. Someone told him in the hotel ... Yes, I forgot to tell you that I had arrived from Moscow not alone, but with a woman from the British Council (vs The British Embassy), a chemist, who wasn't interested in poetry. For some reason or other she was with me in this shop, looking at all sorts of different books. She had known that I was going there [to Akhmatova's apartment]. How she knew, how he knew Akhmatova's address, I have no recollection. Somehow or other he found out, and went there. But he [Churchill] didn't know the number, did not know which door, did not know which entrance, didn't know anything, so just stood and yelled.

VS Might one suggest that, in general, he ruined your first meeting with Akhmatova?

IB He spoilt it totally and utterly. I'll say this, it was like a nightmare, something improbable, I could not imagine what had happened. As you can imagine, I was terribly embarrassed, I took him off back to the hotel, settled him down there, passed on his instructions about the caviare and the ice, and then I decided, of course, that I had to go and apologise. I don't remember how I managed to remember Akhmatova's telephone number, maybe Orlov had given it to me at some stage.⁸ And I rang her up, you see, and said that this terrible business, that I was apologising for the disturbance, for what had happened, that he was an impossible person, the son, of course, of the former prime minister of England (Churchill was no longer prime minister at this time), and I apologised profusely, it was such a peculiar story, which, I know ... Well, and she said: 'Yes, yes, I understand, I understand.' And I said: 'Dare I ask, might I, perhaps, visit you again?' She said: 'I will be waiting for you at nine this evening.' Or, perhaps, she said 'I will expect [you].'

⁸ IB did indeed have her address and telephone number, written on a slip of paper by her friend Antonina Oranzhireeva.

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VS What year was this?

IB In 1945.

VS In January?

IB No, no, in 1945, it was in November. In November of 1945. I went there again, she had a friend there with her, who was an Assyriologist. I think she was well known, a student of Akhmatova's second husband, Shileiko, who was an Assyriologist. We again began talking about this, that and the other. This woman asked me about universities in England, about those who taught there, what they did. This was all, you know, perfectly all right, not without interest, but all the same it was commonplaces, in the main. And so it went on from nine to eleven, I think. At half past eleven this woman ... you know, I could see that she wanted to go to bed. This was clear, such a sleepy expression came over her face. And after about fifteen minutes she said: 'You know, I ... I have to get up early tomorrow morning, I'm going.' So she went. And after that the real conversation between us began. *I don't remember the details of it, but she began to talk about herself, asked me who I knew abroad among those whom she knew. For example, Stravinsky. She knew him, knew his wife. They were people from Petersburg. She did not know Muscovites so well. That is, she knew Pasternak, but that was afterwards.* Then she asked me about him. Then she asked ... about what else? She asked about Boris Anrep, whom I didn't know. He was her friend, but I did not know him. I knew who he was, he lived in London, he did mosaics. He made them, and you know, in fact, Akhmatova [said that] there was even one in one of the floors at the National Gallery. Apparently, he created something of his own there, of different people, there's a whole mosaic of them, in which different people whom he knew appear in different mythological guises.⁹ And then what did she talk about? About Halpern, about Salome Halpern, or rather Salome Andronikov, as she was in her day.

⁹ In this mosaic Akhmatova represents Compassion.

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VS And you could talk about Salome at that stage, because she was, I think, already in England at that time?

IB Salome was in England at around that time, yes.

VS But what is interesting, she told you something of herself?

IB Yes, she did. She talked about her youth, spoke of how she had lived near the sea, the edge of the Black Sea, and said that her life had been, she said, wonderful, pantheistic, unspoilt and, you know, so natural [i.e. back to nature]. This had absolutely nothing to do with Christianity. 'I am a Christian, of course,' she told me then, but in those days, when she was young, there, by the Black Sea, she had [lived in] a classical back-to-nature state. That's what she said. Then she began to talk about Tashkent. She said that she had not long ago returned from a visit there. Wonderful people, you know, old Jews there with long beards, biblical types: Abraham was there, and Isaac, and Jacob – that's how it had begun and how it had continued. And she began to describe the town and its inhabitants, and then began to talk some more about herself. She told me that she had had a first husband, Gumilev. She spoke little about him. I suddenly asked, for no particular reason: 'You knew Mandel'stam of course?' She didn't answer this, simply burst into tears, just wept. I saw that this question ... that it was impossible for her to talk about this, it was far too painful to her. Then she said: 'Yes, yes, I knew him, knew him. Aleksey Tolstoy got up to some terrible things, that's all.' And then she began to talk about him quite specifically, she said: 'He is a dreadful character, an all-out rogue, but a fascinating person. I know him. We were in Tashkent together, you know. He would say to me: 'Look here, Annushka, when we get back, we'll go on the booze together.'

VS Didn't she show you some manuscripts or other? Perhaps she read something to you?

IB She read, indeed she did; she didn't show me anything but she began to read. She said: 'Would you like me to read you some of my verse?' I of course said 'Yes.' Then she began to read. She read

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everything, read from *Rosary*, read from *The White Flock*, read from *Requiem*. She explained to me how *Requiem* had been written, how it had been when she had stood in line, how this particular woman had come up to her and said her to her: 'What do you do?' 'I am a writer.' 'Will you write about this?' said this woman. This was a queue of people, who wanted, you see, to send parcels or letters to people in the camps in Siberia, you understand? Such an improbable queue of people. She wanted to send something to her son. 'Will you write about this?' 'Yes, I will.' And from this came *Requiem*. This was at the end of the 1930s, when her son had been sent away [to the gulag] for the first time. I think he was sent there three times. But that was later. And then she began to read from *Requiem*, she read the whole of it. Then she read *Rosary*, read *The White Flock*, then she read a section of *Poem without a Hero*, it wasn't yet finished. I didn't know that it was ... She didn't tell me that it was *Poem without a Hero*. I only found out later, that it was a section from *Poem without a Hero*. She read it brilliantly.

VS Yes, that's what I wanted to ask.

IB You must know the recordings. She read brilliantly, dolefully, that is, in such a sonorous voice, she read in such a terribly sad, melancholy manner. The voice neither rose nor fell, it was all very much on the same level, so utterly dissimilar from Pasternak, for example, whose voice rang out. Hers did not ring out, in no way at all. Well, and then, then ... I was absolutely enchanted by this and did not interrupt her. Then she said: 'You know what, I shall read to you in English as well.' I said: 'What are you going to read?' 'I shall read Byron.' She found a volume of Byron and began to read from *Don Juan*. Not a single word, not one, was intelligible. She read, of course, but the English pronunciation of what she read bore no relation to the language which English people speak. But I didn't say anything to her, just listened. It went very smoothly and rhythmically, and it was evident that she was deeply moved. It was only then that I understood that when we, for example, read the ancient Greeks, we have no understanding of how Plato pronounced his words or how Euripides or Euclid did either. But of course we take this into account and consider them still to be great writers, despite the fact that we probably read them just as inaccurately as she read Byron. Which means that it is possible to

understand poetry without understanding the [correct] intonation of that poetry. People deny this, and say that poetry is precisely in the intonation. Well of course the [correct] intonation matters, but, perhaps, perhaps it is also possible to understand poetry without it. You know, I was convinced when I heard her that she was reading Byron. Then, it was already, by now it was, I think, about two in the morning. And then her son Gumilev – who was an anti-aircraft gunner – suddenly appeared. He was, you understand, one of those people, who had been allowed at that time ... from the camps, certain people you know, so to say, not very important ones who had been arrested, who wanted to [volunteer] had been allowed to join the punitive forces.

VS The penal battalions.¹⁰

IB The penal battalion, that's it, he had joined a penal battalion, had been in Germany and had returned. They [Akhmatova and Gumilev] were at that time on the best of terms.¹¹ Then she suddenly said: 'You know, it's half past two, we must eat something.' I said: 'I don't need anything.' 'No, no, no, how can I?' The room was absolutely empty, there was, I think ... all that there was, was a table, there was some kind of ... there was no cupboard, no cupboard, I think there was some kind of box, and above the fireplace there was this wonderful painting by Modigliani. That's it.

VS There was a fireplace, yes?

IB Above the fireplace. There was a fireplace. Above the fireplace. I asked her: 'What is that?' She said: 'It's Modigliani.' I said: 'He's a famous Italian painter.' 'Yes, yes, yes, but he's famous is he?' I said: 'Yes, yes, he's famous.' 'And is he still alive?' 'No, I said, 'he died at the beginning of the 1920s, he was very poor; he died, in all probability, from poverty, almost from hunger.' She told me that she knew none of this. It is the one thing that I could not comprehend. Because people must have known he was no

¹⁰ Probably a reference to prisoners from the gulag being allowed out, but straight into the front lines as cannon fodder.

¹¹ They later fell out.

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longer alive. I think even [Il'ya] Ehrenburg could have told her this, someone like him who was living in the West. Perhaps it was impertinently misguided of me to doubt the truth of what she told me. But this is what she said.

VS And what did she feed you with?

IB Very well. Then Lev Gumilev went out, then she went out, and then she reappeared with some kind of basin, in which were floating some kind of ... they were potatoes. That was it. Some salt. She was obviously terribly embarrassed that she was so poor, that she could only regale me with this.... She was terribly ... she was embarrassed, she said: 'How can I? But you know how things are for us.' I wanted to reassure her that I did not need to eat these potatoes, that this was not, by any means, what I had come for. But she made me eat, probably half of the potatoes, maybe even all of them. After which we began to talk again. Then Gumilev talked to me. He talked a little, explained where he had been in Germany, what he had been engaged in, and stayed there, I think, about an hour. Then he left. Then we talked some more. Then what did she talk about? She talked about Pasternak, of course. She told me that he was a great friend of hers. It was impossible to talk about Mandel'stam. She talked about [Marina] Tsvetaeva and said: 'Tsvetaeva is a better poet than I.' 'Marina' she called her – not 'Tsvetaeva'. Then what else?

VS What did she say about Pasternak?

IB That he was an extraordinary man. I already knew him by that time – an extraordinary man. And when he arrived from London in 1934, he was rather ill at that time, he stayed with her, and then she said: 'Always, when he didn't feel very well, he would say: "I want to go to Akhmatova's."' But only when he felt bad. And on that occasion his wife came from Moscow to collect him. She [AA] didn't say anything in particular about him. She spoke about Blok, of course. She said that she had not been on particularly good terms with Blok, that everyone thought that she was in love with him, and that there's something about it in the verse [by AA], I think called 'The Grey-Eyed King Died' or something like it,¹² that

¹² *The Grey-Eyed King*.

it's about Blok. But it was nothing of the kind. 'All the teachers in Russia think that there was a romance between he and me. Nothing of the kind. He didn't love me, and I did not particularly like him. I respected him, enjoyed his well-known verse, but didn't like him very much. He was deeply unsympathetic to me as a person.' That's what she said. 'I remember one thing only, we were sitting together on the stage of a theatre, of some recital hall or other and had to read our verse. I said to him: "Alexander Alexandrovich, you go first." "What do you mean, first? We aren't tenors, Anna Andreevna." I was ashamed.' She said: 'He said things like that.' Then, what else did she say?

VS About Akhmatova's first husband?

IB No, no, she didn't talk about her first, Gumilev. Not about Gumilev, or about Shileiko, nor about Punin. She was already divorced from him, he lived in the same apartment block.

VS Perhaps she directed the conversation to what upset her, disturbed her, about the things which tormented her perhaps, I don't know.

IB No, no, she didn't talk about such things. We were ... she wasn't confiding in that respect. We talked about poetry, about literature, of course. What was particularly of note was that she did not like Chekhov. She didn't like him at all, she said that he was a grey writer. Everyone is trapped in some kind of mud-bath, do you see? Nothing in the world ... everything in the world is grey and miserable and somehow wearisome, and swords do not clash.

VS She had a completely different opinion of Dostoevsky, did she not?

IB He was, for her, of course, the major writer. I gave her some Kafka. And she said to me later, when she came to Oxford: 'Kafka was written for me. It was written for me. There are books specially written for people. Kafka is my writer. He wrote for me alone.' I was happy that I had given it to her. She did not read German, I think, and I gave her an English translation. She could

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read English. And then we talked some more – about Tolstoy. That he was an outstanding seer, but she said: ‘You know, Tolstoy was a great man, but his morality served no useful purpose. Why he had to condemn Anna Karenina, it’s impossible to agree with that. It was the morality of his aunts in Moscow, and not his own real one. He knew only too well what Anna Karenina had done. And what he did with her is terrible. I will never forgive him for it.’ That was Tolstoy. Well then, she talked endlessly about Pushkin, of course. I don’t remember any of it, but, of course, Pushkin, Pushkin without [end] ...

VS With enthusiasm?

IB Later on she read, of course, she read me, she had written something in prose, I think, she had written an essay about Pushkin’s semi-verse, semi-prose works – not *The Feast in the Time of Plague*. But perhaps, what is it, ‘The Mansion Shone ...?’ What was it? [vs *Egyptian Nights*.] *Egyptian Nights*, yes, that’s it. She wrote about *Egyptian Nights*. And she said that she had been the first to discover that the Improviser in it was Mickiewicz, and that no one had spoken of this before. We talked about Mickiewicz’s attitude towards Pushkin. so that, in general was what [the discussion] was about. And then what? She talked about Tsarskoe Selo. About her youth in Tsarskoe Selo. And then she talked – in Oxford now – about how when Gumilev went to Abyssinia and then came back, she had met him at the station, and he had looked at her sternly and said: ‘Having you been writing anything?’ ‘Yes.’ ‘Poetry?’ ‘Yes.’ ‘Read it to me.’ She said, right there, on the platform, yes, on the very platform, she read something or other. And he said: ‘Yes, yes, not bad.’ Then they went home. In his opinion to be a poet, or a poetess, the wife of a poet – was absurd. And he really hated the fact that she was a poet. ‘That’, she said to me, ‘he could not abide.’ How stupid: the poet got married, the poet married a poetess, so how could it be otherwise?

VS And tell me, that same evening didn’t she give you something, some kind of book perhaps?

IB That evening, that evening she gave me nothing. But she gave me quite a lot of things the next time I visited her. I spent the

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whole of that night with her until nearly ten or eleven in the morning. And so we had a very long conversation. And I left her to go back to the hotel in such a state of exhilaration, I remember. And after that I didn't see her again in Leningrad. I went back to Moscow, I was working at the British Embassy. Then, when I visited her the next time, in January of 1946, I left the Soviet Union for England after

VS And that was for good, yes?

IB For good, yes, and I left after ... I deliberately left via Leningrad, in order to be able to see her, in order to say goodbye. And then via Helsinki by train. And she then gave me various books of her poetry with inscriptions, which I still have. I take great care [of them] ...

VS Might you show me two or three of them?

IB Yes of course, go ahead. This is all of them. And you can show them [on camera].

VS I simply wanted to ... right here ... yes, look I've arranged it, yes, look, thank you.

IB This is *Anno Domini*. Would you like me to read some?

VS Yes, of course.

IB I read poetry badly, you know. I'm dreadfully, terribly prosaic. I know nothing about poetry. Akhmatova is my only experience I have had of it in my life. Though there's Pasternak too.

No one knocks at my door.
Only the mirror dreams to the mirror,
The silence watches over the silence.¹³

It's signed 'AA', a double 'A', that's her signature.

¹³ From *Requiem*, part 2.

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VS And look, here ... we can show this to our viewers, *From the Sixth Book* (IB You read): *Verses* by Anna Akhmatova. And here too, 'To I. Berlin. As a token of respect and with warm good wishes. Anna Akhmatova. 4 January 1946.'

IB That was just as we were saying goodbye to each other. I was only with her for two hours.

VS You have *The White Flock* here, too, look, this is the 1928 edition, I think. (IB Yes). 'To I. Berlin, with whom I never discussed Cleopatra.'

IB But that isn't quite so, she *did* talk about Cleopatra. But I think that she ... but I understand what she meant by that.

VS *At the Edge of the Sea*. Here too ... 'To Isaiah Berlin in fond memory of Leningrad. November 1946. Akhmatova.' Well, we can show you with all the rest of the books later. Right now, as I remember it, your last meeting did not take place till many years later.

IB I want to tell you ... about 1946, I want to tell you [something more]. Whenever I touched, in the most superficial way, on something relating to politics in some way, she would point to the ceiling and say: 'You mustn't. The authorities.' And I'd break off. We didn't take things further. I thought that this was a private issue. Two or three times [she said]: 'You mustn't, the authorities.' And so, as regards politics ... we said not a word about the Soviet Union. And then she told me this story, of how Stalin had vented his fury on her [*inaudible*] ... this had already happened. But she told me all about this in Oxford.

VS And your meeting in Oxford, that was in 1965, was it?

IB I'll tell you about it ... In 1956 I was in Russia again, more or less as a tourist, and I was staying at the British Embassy, which I knew well [*inaudible*]¹⁴ who lives here in Oxford. And I visited

¹⁴ He would have referred here to his friend William Hayter, who was then British Ambassador, and IB's host in Moscow.

Pasternak. He said to me: 'You know, Anna Akhmatova would like to have a chat with you. You can't go and visit her, because she is afraid, because her son has only just returned [from the camps]. Because this business had been going for so long she did not want to meet with foreigners. But I could speak to her on the telephone. So I rang her.

VS Direct from Pasternak's?

IB No. From a telephone booth I think, in all probability, or, perhaps, from the embassy. Even totally out in the open. [*inaudible*] it was understood: everything that was said on the telephone would be made known where it was required.

VS She came to the telephone herself?

IB She did. She answered. We had a [*inaudible*] conversation, which she then related, not altogether correctly, to Lydia Chukovskaya. Not entirely correctly. We don't need to discuss that. I've told you ... I wrote about it ... in my ...

VS But in a few words, might you just recap on it?

IB Very well. Pasternak had told her that I was married. And it was absolutely evident that this had offended her. Not because there had been some kind of romance between us, nothing of the sort, it was only a single evening and two hours in 1946. And the whole thing had been very, very formal, so to say. Exceedingly formal. She was a very formal person, noted for it – guarded, formal. But ... somehow or other I became part of her mythology. You see, in general, she romanticised herself. There was no denying this. Romanticised and romanticised. And I, without warning, found myself part of the very myth which she inhabited. And because I became part of this myth I had some kind of very special relationship with her. And she, you know, referred to me as 'the guest from the future' in *Poem Without a Hero*. But what this signified is also unclear. In one of the verses she said I will come,

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but will be an unloved husband, will bring her only unhappiness.¹⁵ Because I ... am some kind of fateful being, some kind of fateful person in her life. But to marry – that is such a vulgar thing. I did not have this right. I was only obliged to exist for her and she for me. I understood that. And because of this she said to me: ‘Pasternak told me that you are married’ – in a rather severe tone of voice.

VS And this was on the telephone, yes?

IB Yes. I said: ‘That is correct.’ ‘When did you get married?’ I said: ‘This year.’ This was in the beginning of 1956, five or six months earlier than this, as I remember. She said: ‘Ah, so there it is! Congratulations.’ I said: ‘Thank you.’ That’s all. And then she told Lydia Chukovskaya all this, not in quite the same way, but differently, you understand, in very stern tones. You could tell that it had offended her, that was clear. Then she said: ‘I can’t see you. You know why that is.’ I said: ‘I do.’ ‘That’s a shame.’ I said: ‘Yes, I’m very sorry.’ ‘We’ll see each other somehow.’ ‘I hope so.’ And now ... my translation from Korean is coming out.’ I said ‘Oh, I see.’ ‘You know how much Korean I know. That is, my selected works you know. I didn’t make the selection. Surkov, who also wrote the foreword to it, did it.’ I said: ‘I’d like to see it.’ ‘Well, I’ll send it to you, I’ll send it to you. But you know, probably there’ll soon be a single-volume edition of my verse, they’re about to publish me, I’ll send it to England. It hasn’t happened yet. But it will.’ And of course there wasn’t one, because there was a decree, the Zhdanov business.

VS The Zhdanov pronouncement.

IB It didn’t happen. But she waited for it. They told her then, I think, in the Writer’s Union, that it would happen. But then she said: ‘So now then. Now there’s nothing more to talk to you about.

¹⁵ ‘[There] will enter a man, / He will not be a beloved husband to me [...] It is death that he bears.’ From the ‘Third and Last’ dedication to *Poem without a Hero*, written on 5 January (Epiphany Eve) 1956, the tenth anniversary of her most recent meeting with IB: *The Complete Poems of Anna Akhmatova*, trans. Judith Hemschemeyer, ed. Roberta Reeder, 2nd ed. (Boston, Massachusetts/Edinburgh, 1994), 547.

Unfortunately, I must put an end to this conversation. I hope we shall meet.' 'I hope so.' 'Goodbye.' But it was very curt, I must tell you. Yes. And rather frosty. I understood that I, you see, had committed the most impossible crime. That was clear. And later, when she came to England, they awarded her, gave her here in Oxford, gave her a degree. She had received the previous one in Italy, in Taormina, then here, in Oxford. She came to London, I visited her in London also ... and when I was with her we again talked about everything. At that time she told me the story, that someone had related to her, about how Stalin had become absolutely furious with her. And she said to me: 'You know, I assure you of this. You and I – we're historic people.' 'Why historic people?' 'Because we started the Cold War. Stalin was furious, and this was the starting point for the Cold War.' I wanted to convince her that, terribly important though we might be, we were not, perhaps, quite as important as that. But no, she was deadly serious, without the least irony, you see, she was convinced that something had sprung from this. And it is also a myth, of course, that we were the central protagonists, that we had some kind of historical significance, that in some way or other we were making history, something important, you see. Very well then. Then she began to talk about her life in Moscow, how there had been this crack-down, and how miserable her life was. That day, when I left her in Leningrad, that very same day, people came and installed (how do you say it in Russian?) – loudspeakers ...

VS Microphones?

IB: ... in her ceiling. They did it openly. It was not done to frighten her, but simply to make it clear to her that something rather unpleasant had happened. [*inaudible*] She had lost her [*inaudible*] card, she was excluded from the Writers' Union and so on, all this was later. But it was evident that I had brought trouble on her. For the whole of her life she believed that her misfortune had come through me. But aside from this, no doubt, it's true that perhaps, just maybe she exaggerated it all a little, because Zoshchenko was also having a hard time, and not because of me [*inaudible*] and Pasternak had also been censured. That's not because I ... many foreigners had visited him. And although she

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was convinced that I was some kind of fateful figure for her, a very important, central person, you see, a guest from the future ... [*inaudible*] so important and from which something highly significant had emanated.

VS Just now you said something about your meeting with her in England. That was in 1965. Is that correct?

IB Yes. She came to Oxford with Punin's granddaughter,¹⁶ who took her everywhere, and with that lady, who later wrote her biography – Amanda Reid.¹⁷ An American. She lives in Australia now. She was very devoted to her. And they travelled together, you know, and her [Akhmatova's] interpreter, from London, was there too. Mr [Peter] Norman.

VS And do you remember, perhaps, in chronological order, what she did on her trip here, to England, in 1965? We are now in Oxford, she received her doctorate here, and was that all ... did she give a speech or anything, as such?

IB No, she didn't. This is how it was. First of all she stayed in London, probably at the Soviet embassy, then they came here, and she said that she wanted to stay with us, here. But she was forbidden to do so and for this reason she stayed ... in the Randolph Hotel, [*inaudible*] a more or less pretty good hotel. And the whole world went there to see her. For example, Annenkov, who had once drawn her portrait, came from Paris. Struve, whom she hauled over the coals, came from California. She told him that his edition was no good for anything, that the verses had been garbled, that he should not publish such things, and in particular that she had published the two famous poems to Stalin [*inaudible*] only in order to get her son out of the gulag. Well, it was evident: they had in all probability told her that she must do this. And he

¹⁶ Anna Genrikhovna ('Anya') Kaminskaya (b. 1939), art historian; granddaughter of Nikolay Punin, step-granddaughter, companion and friend to Anna Akhmatova.

¹⁷ sc. Amanda Chase Haight (1939–89), author of *Anna Akhmatova: A Poetic Pilgrimage* (Oxford, 1976).

published these poems.¹⁸ She said that it was nothing short of a scandal, that people who, you understand, who had a pistol held to their head, that what they said at that moment should not be considered as relevant to their biography. And for that reason he had had no right to publish them. And for this reason there were arguments: to publish or not to publish. In the new edition of Akhmatova in America these poems, I think, will probably be included, but, probably somewhere, in some kind of appendix, with an explanatory note that she did not wish [*inaudible*] this to happen. [*Inaudible*] for this reason, [she had conducted] correspondence with these editors, but she had not wanted to meet Struve at all. She asked me not to introduce him. And so, in the first instance, I didn't. She was holding court in the Randolph, various Parisians came there. Then ... who else came? Maybe ... I don't remember. The editor of *Ariel Ways* [*Vozdushnye puti*] came from New York ... Grinberg. She said to Grinberg: 'I didn't have the right ... I didn't give you the right to publish my verse. I did not give that right to anyone abroad. But you went ahead and published. What right did you have to do that? You might at least have paid me for it,' she said. He said: 'The Soviet law is on my side.' [*inaudible*], and not very courteously. After which she didn't speak to him any more. And then ... who else came there? I honestly didn't know all of them, who they were. Various specialists. And then, after the Randolph, she sat in state, receiving people in a very regal manner. And then, of course, they awarded her a degree....

VS And straight from there she went ...

IB ... from the hotel ...

VS This was that morning? What time?

IB It was in the morning. She received her award that very same ... at the same ceremony when the English poet Siegfried Sassoon received his degree ... but they all looked at her, not at him. He was very offended. But that's by the by. He was in any case a

¹⁸ The Stalin poems, generally acknowledged to be deliberate doggerel, are not usually included in editions of AA's work.

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somewhat thin-skinned person. Well then. Then she sat down ... She was in a [*inaudible*] mood ... physically. It is a general rule that one must go up the steps in order to receive one's degree, but on this occasion not the chancellor, but the vice-chancellor of the university, ... the [*inaudible*] award, [*inaudible*] put it on her. But he understood that she could not do this, and went down the steps to her [*inaudible*] and awarded it. When she was awarded her degree, it was clear that she was very moved. And then she went back to her room and rested. And then that evening she came to us for dinner. We had, I think ...

VS What, here, yes?

IB Yes, in this house. In this very house. She came to dinner. The only other guest was ... Mr Obolensky ... he's some professor – Prince Obolensky. A professor of Russian history.

VS Dimitri, yes?

IB Yes. He came with his wife. He's semi-separated from her now. She liked them very much. And we had a pleasant evening. Although she didn't talk very much to much to my wife. She didn't say much. She sat there stiffly, with a straight back, very proud. I think she didn't feel altogether comfortable in the house. I don't know why that was. When I had been on my own with her, she had really enjoyed herself at the hotel ... everything was as it had been before ... absolutely, you know, without any kind of [*inaudible*], she talked about herself, talked about what it signified for her that they had now forgiven her for everything, that she was in a good mood, that she, you know ... that she was being published again, that people were visiting her, that from out of the Great House, as she called the establishment, nobody now came to call on her, that everything was OK. Then she told me what it had been like in Italy. She said: 'I was in Rome. In Rome Christianity and paganism still wrestle with one another. Neither has subjugated [the other].' I wrote that down too. In that article. I remember that. [*inaudible*]. But then ... what else did she say then? Then I gave a soirée in her honour. At New College. That's one of the colleges. New College, here. And I invited masses of people who wanted to meet her. She sat in an armchair, like a queen, and

received them. One after the other. They were like [official] audiences, you see. Struve was there. He said: 'Look, you cannot not present me. That would be dreadful. Such a thing has never happened in my life ... I really ... well, do what you can, you know me. I have never done you any harm. For God's sake.' And so I presented him. She was, nevertheless, considerably gracious, received him and invited him to visit her in London. And he did indeed visit her. She did him this favour all the same. Then ... she talked to everyone. All ... all of Russian Oxford went there. All kinds of lecturers, professors. All who were involved, in some way or other, with Russian, except for Professor Konovalov... all these people came and, so to say, crowded around her, you see, she had her own [*inaudible*] and she was very gratified – that it was all so pleasant, that they were all so taken up with her, that this was some special moment in her life to be received, you see, into this, the Oxford intelligentsia as it were. The principal of this college came, he was then the ambassador in Moscow in [*inaudible*]. Before that he had been head of this college. The very same ... William Hayter was his name. He talked to her as well. It was altogether a very happy evening. Then she left, and then I visited her once more at her hotel. I don't remember anything in particular about what we may have discussed. Maybe you can ask some questions, and then I'll respond to them ...

VS And so, after her departure back to the Soviet Union from Oxford, you corresponded?

IB No, not a word. I thought that it was not very easy for her. She went from here to Paris. They gave her a visa to go there, and there she met her old friend Boris Anrep. He wrote about this in his memoirs ... you see, he [*inaudible*] saw ... had previously seen her for the last time, I think, in 1917, in Petersburg ... in Petrograd. And she ... he somehow ... she gave him something, he gave her something ... some kind of little crucifix or some kind of ring with a black stone ... I know, I know something like ... and this ring, with the black stone, during the London talks ... during the war he lost it ... And then he said, as you know, he said ... that she visited him, she rang him up, he said: 'I'm here.' He went to see her, then said: 'You know, she has changed terribly. I

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knew her as a slender, lissom young woman – but [found] in front of me Catherine the Great.’ And he couldn’t talk to her. This was terrible for both of them. He left, as he told it to me, went to a café and sat there for five hours in a state of utter melancholy, do you see, he just couldn’t pull himself together. And so that’s why it was not a success. And then I was in Princeton in 1964. The Russian composer Artur Lurié, who was, I think, commissar for music in the first Soviet government, under Lunacharsky, probably. I think, commissar [*inaudible*] Lunacharsky. By that time, he had already become, by the way, a fervent Catholic. [*inaudible*] lived in Princeton, perhaps, was composing, perhaps, no, but he asked that I should tell him everything that I could about her. He said: ‘Did she talk about me?’ I said: ‘I can’t say. Not a word, it would seem. I had no idea that she knew you.’ He was offended. I came to the conclusion, I think, that in his day he had been an intimate friend of hers. That is, during the Petersburg years. What else can I tell you?

VS You are one of the most eminent specialists in the West, as it were, one of the authorities on our Russian literature, particularly of the nineteenth century. I know that you have written a book about Herzen and Tolstoy, if I am not mistaken

IB Not a book. I don’t write books as such, as you know.

VS As I understood it, these books were comprised of those lectures which you had given to your students ...

IB You know, I am lazy by nature. I’ve only written one book in my life – before the war. And this, strange as it may seem, was a book about Karl Marx. This book was a kind of textbook, which was written in the 1930s, although it is still read, though I don’t know why. [*inaudible*] a better book after that. But I wrote ... it is correct that I wrote one short work about Tolstoy, which is entitled *The Hedgehog and the Fox* ... and then what ... I wrote two studies on Tolstoy. That is, that same study *The Hedgehog and the Fox* and ‘Tolstoy and Enlightenment’. These came out ... have already been published in English. I am no great authority [*inaudible*] of literature; I am essentially, by nature, simply a teacher of philosophy in Oxford and for this reason am called a professor

of political theory. What I know of Russian, is, so to speak, only because I was born in the city of Riga and have never forgotten my Russian. I have never, you see, been in any kind of Russian department ... of Russian language, Russian literature, I've never taught anyone. I have simply read books and conversed with Russian people. That is all, in essence.

VS In conclusion, so to speak, of our Akhmatova theme, I would like once more to return to her centenary, which is being commemorated in our country, and would simply like it if you might give us some kind of assessment of this ...

IB But how can I, really, how can I? I am no specialist in poetry. What I have to say about literature is worth nothing. I am simply an aficionado, so to speak. Just as there are music lovers, so it is in literature. I am not a professional. I have nothing important and valuable enough, nor enduring, to say of any kind. In my opinion she is a great poet. A remarkable, sincere poet. And do you know what is remarkable about her ... I don't know if there are even people who would say this much ... Salome Halpern for example, her friend, said ... she didn't like ... what I am about to say now ... and that is, that she spoke too openly about herself, spoke too openly about her own personal situation and experiences ... what is absolutely clear is that when you read her poetry, you can clearly read in it her, so to speak, emotional autobiography. This is what I like, but Salome Nikolaevna didn't like it, because ... for some reason or other she did not like this.

VS And so would you ... accept one more question in addition ... I simply wanted to ask you ...

IB I can only tell you that my meeting with her was the most remarkable day in my life. There has never been a more remarkable day in my life. Something that will remain with me for ever. I was happy, I was proud, I was very moved – moved for the rest of my life. What more is there that I can tell you? I think about her constantly. Although ... not in connection with the centenary. But because they are now honouring her, and they are doing it properly, and she would have liked that. She knew her

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own worth. But whether you are going to do the same for Pasternak's centenary I'm not clear.

VS We shall. However, if you are not tired, I would like to touch on the Pasternak theme if I may. And perhaps ... I don't know ... simply tell me whatever you like ...

IB Well, you know, when I talked with Akhmatova, it was absolutely clear that during the Soviet era, so to speak, there were only four poets: there was herself, Mandel'shtam, there was Tsvetaeva, there was Pasternak. Nobody else counted. There were of course other poets. As we know, that was of no interest to her. These four people were the only real ones for her. She lived in this circle, thought about these people, she didn't know Tsvetaeva very well, because Tsvetaeva was in Moscow, and then went abroad, and came back only just at the end. She met up with her then, I think. But not very often. So these four people were for her the people who mattered.

Now you want to ask about Pasternak. I had already visited him, you know, in 1945, because he had sisters here, [*inaudible*] two sisters lived here in Oxford. They enlisted me to deliver to him ... when I went, I knew that I was going to work at the embassy, at the British embassy in 1945, in September ... they gave me a pair of boots for him. I took these boots with me. But I didn't know where I could meet him. Then on the fourth day after my arrival there was a banquet for the *British Ally*. This was a journal which the British embassy published in Moscow, and to which I had been invited. I met Korney Ivanovich Chukovsky there as well ... at that same banquet. And I sat there ... then I sat not far away from Prokofiev's wife ... Galina Ivanovna, as they called her then. I just chatted with her. Then suddenly she brought up the name of Pasternak, said something or other. I said: 'Do you know Pasternak?' She: 'But of course, yes, I know him.' I said: 'I have a pair of boots for him. Would you perhaps like to pass them on to him?' She said: 'But why don't you give them to him yourself?' 'I would with the greatest ... but we cannot meet.' I was very shy. I did not know what was allowed and what wasn't, what right I had to simply go and knock on someone's door, particularly someone eminent, famous and not known to me, let alone to do so about a pair of boots. But she said: 'Go with me.' We went to Peredelkino.

And I took the boots. He was very surprised, you know, and said: 'No no, it can't be. The boots are for me? It can't be. You've brought them for me – I'll give them to my brother.' He said: 'They aren't for me.' It was extremely embarrassing. And then I got to know him. Had dinner with him ... Had lunch [*inaudible*], and at that time, his wife, you know, and Mrs Prokofiev was there, who died not long ago, I think. And ... who else was there? No one else. On that occasion no one else was there. And we talked about everything. And he began to talk about how they had sent him to England, that this had been interesting, that he was a personalist (I didn't know what a personalist was). He said: 'Take Edward Reid' – he's some English writer of some kind – 'there's a personalist for you.' I didn't know this either. Edward Reid was an anarchist. Everyone knew that. A really nice person. That's another matter. And then he began to talk also about his past, began to talk about Mayakovsky, began to talk about his own youth and chattered away ... and you know, I had a sense with him, which I did not experience with Akhmatova, that I was in the presence of genius. And I was aware of the presence of genius not because he was a genius, but because he spoke brilliantly, with the most wonderful expressions – half-crazed, but almost profound in their semi-veracity. And it was, you know, extremely thrilling to be with him. That was the main thing. And this strange voice of his boomed out, and, you know, the ideas poured from his brain, one after the other. It was very stimulating. It took hold [of you] in a way that was so noble and serene. Being with him was unbelievably thrilling. And the images were absolutely remarkable. I experienced something I never had before, you see. There were other people with whom I also experienced it. Virginia Woolf, as a writer, it was the same with her. When I met her for the first time, or Freud – the psychologist – I did not feel this. They were geniuses, but this hadn't happened. And for this reason I had the most thrilling two hours with him, and then I left. Later I visited him nearly every week in Moscow, at his apartment, and talked with him about everything. About Shakespeare's poetry. He said: 'Shakespeare ... I wanted to make Shakespeare work for me. It didn't happen.'

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VS You were one of the first to read his manuscript of *Doctor Zhivago* ...

IB He gave me his manuscript of *Doctor Zhivago* in 1956. The first ... the original manuscript, of course, was handed over to that Italian, who took it to Italy. He was some Italian Communist. This communist thought that Feltrinelli, who was also a Communist would publish ... would publish it in Italian, he was an agent for Feltrinelli, he talked to us about [*inaudible*], he too was an agent for Feltrinelli. And so, you understand, it was important for Feltrinelli to receive the first copy, and so he gave the second to me. I read it all night and then went round to him, and we talked about it. And his wife said to me: 'Listen, please persuade him not to publish it. Bad things will only come of it for us if they publish. You know that it is banned ... they said permission will be given, but without permission it must not be, that must be absolutely clear to you. [*inaudible*] Take a copy, put it away somewhere. But there is no need to hand it over to be published in Italy.' I started talking to him about this. I said: 'Your wife and yourself – you have children.' He said: 'What right do you have to talk to me in that tone? I've talked it over with my children. They are prepared. As for my wife, I don't know. But the children are prepared to go through everything. You must not say another word to me about it.' Well, of course, you see, I went back on my word after this. I took this copy with me. And I gave it to his sisters. Here, in Oxford. And I did not see it again. It didn't remain with me.

VS Here in Oxford, with his sisters, as far as I know, there is a large collection, in general, his father ... drawings ...

IB Oh yes, yes. His elder sister, you know, revered their father more than she did her brother. And he [Pasternak] was rather jealous. It was always her opinion that their father was a great artist. 'Everyone goes on about "Boris, Boris", but what about Leonid? What [*inaudible*] Leonid? He was a great artist, who was not appreciated in the West.' They held him in high regard. And she in particular. And the younger sister, Lydia that is, translated him into English.

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VS And Boris Pasternak also, no doubt, read you some of his own work?

IB No, no. No, he didn't read anything. He talked about his public readings. He related the well-known story about when (Aleksey) Surkov was reading something. And suddenly there was unexpected applause in the hall ... this was, I think, in the Hall of Columns. And Surkov thought: at last, he'd finally arrived, that they understood him. But at that very moment Pasternak had been entering the hall. And I think that all the poets ... did not have the best of relations with Pasternak. Yes. But no, he didn't read anything out loud to me. He gave me some books. And wrote me letters. I think I probably have a couple of letters from him.

VS Well, perhaps we can find them somewhere later.

IB I don't know where they are. Not sure. He never wrote to me about anything particularly important. But he wrote to many. I remember, he said: 'Once on the radio, I heard someone or other reading in English. And I thought, who is that? Who is that? Who could that be? It was me. They were reading me. It turned out that it was the poet Shelley.' That was fairly typical.

VS And when was the last time you saw him?

IB The last time ... was, I think, in that same year, 1956. They did not want him to [*inaudible*]. They wanted to award him a degree, but they wouldn't allow him out of Russia In 1945 I couldn't persuade anyone here to award him a degree, because none of the bigwigs in Oxford University had heard of him. There were two people whom I had nominated for an honorary degree: one was Pasternak, the other was de Gaulle, but neither he nor the other was awarded it that year. Well, but later, when, as they say, he became well known, I think that he ... he could not travel out of Russia. The last time I was with him in 1956, when he talked to me ... he spoke about Akhmatova, I was with him in Peredelkino twice. And, you know, I had a very prolonged conversation with him ... there were various people there, for a meal and so on, various people, and he chatted away in the most irrepressible

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manner. His wife was there, and a woman I had never met was with him.

VS And how well acquainted with his work are they here, in Oxford?

IB Extremely well. He is known now all over the world. There are translations. Everyone knows that Pasternak is a great poet. Everyone knows that Tsvetaeva is ... that Tsvetaeva too, and Akhmatova, are great poets. They study them more than they do Blok, for example. Right now he is very much in fashion, especially in America. And it's the same here. And as regards Akhmatova [*inaudible*] some kind of special meeting, there's going to be a celebration in Nottingham, in July. And all these people ... they've invited various people from the Soviet Union as well. They've invited Naiman for example, invited that man Ivanov Vsevolod, invited various, different specialists, and they are all coming to Oxford, in order to see the hallowed places. That's what they're going to do.

VS Well, I think we have had a very enjoyable conversation.

IB Thank you, thank you.

VS Thank you. Forgive me for taking up so much of your time.

IB Not at all, not at all.

VS It was extremely rewarding, interesting for us ...

IB That for me can only be a huge compliment.

VS I myself don't know, but perhaps, I have omitted, perhaps, so to say, there is something you might care to add or something more you'd like to say. I simply Perhaps there might be some ...

IB Thank you.

VSEVOLOD SHISHKOVSKY AND ISAIAH BERLIN

ELENA CHUKOVSKAYA Unfortunately, we have not perhaps been very clear in the time we had to throw light on the trip Anna Akhmatova made to Italy, there was just a mention of it ...

VS Yes, that is interesting.

EC It's very interesting. She was there with our delegation, with Tvardovsky, they were publishing some of her poetry there, that is, I know there were articles in the Western press, and that ... perhaps, no doubt, you remember something of this.

IB No, I know nothing about it. Only what she told me. That this was in Rome, and then she went to [*inaudible*] to receive an award, there was some Mr Vigorelli, I think, who was involved in this. That, in general, is all that I know, I know nothing more about this, know only a little. The only thing that they told me ... and that's not much ... there was this assistant to the minister of foreign affairs of the Soviet Union ... this ... just a moment, what was his name? [*inaudible*] Adamishin. He was in Rome at that time. He was only in Rome. At the embassy. And he met her. And he said to me: 'It was very pleasant.' He spent some time with her and so on. That's all that I know. No Italians ever elaborated any further on this. I don't know whether they remember her there.

EC There was a very funny article by some German author '[*inaudible*] from the Shores of the Neva'. He wrote specifically about how magisterial she was, about how the poets assembled and nobody knew who Akhmatova was, didn't she mention this to you?

IB Who?

EC This article?

IB In Italian?

EC In German. Some German journalist wrote it.

IB Who wrote it?

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EC Tom Wagner. Some well-known German journalist.

IB I don't know anything about it. He was there in Italy with her.

EC Well, he went there to

IB I see, yes.

EC Well, I think the most important thing might be to have a look at all these autographed copies which you have.

IB There aren't many of them, you know. Only inscriptions in these books. This is all there is. All that is lying here in front of you ... In Leningrad, last year, they were saying that there's going to be a museum. Maybe there will be. But this has been going on for years. And it won't be this year and not next. It's been going on for five years at least. Apparently.

EC No, it's moving ahead quickly. I've seen ... they've produced a xerox ... a whole room will be dedicated to *Poem without a Hero* ... that man who wrote to you, he's an official from the museum ... and it seems that there'll be a room dedicated to *Requiem* as well.

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