

**Odessity: In Search of Transnational Odessa  
(or “Odessa the best city in the world: All about Odessa and a  
great many jokes”)<sup>1</sup>**

*by Joachim Schlör*

**Abstract**

*This article presents a research into, and a very personal approach to, the “Odessa myth.” It traces the emergence and development of an idea – that Odessa is different from all other cities. One main element of this mythical or legendary representation is the multi-cultural and transnational character of the city: Not only does Odessa have a Greek, an Armenian, a Jewish, a French and an Italian history, in addition to the more obvious Russian, Ukrainian, Soviet, and post-Soviet narratives, it also finds itself in more than just one place – wherever “Odessity” as a state of mind, a memory, a literary image is being celebrated and constructed.*

In recent years I have become more and more concerned with the notion of “Self and the City”, the idea of a personal relationship between the researcher/writer and the city he/she is looking at and walking through. So what I present here is part of an ongoing project – a building site of sorts – that connects me with the city of Odessa. One could say that I have been trying to write a book about Odessa since the end of 1993, and part of the reason for my difficulty in completing the task (or even beginning it) is the tenuous and ephemeral nature of the place itself. Where is Odessa? Or even: Does Odessa really exist? I would like to take you on a journey to and through a place of whose existence (in history and in the present) we cannot really be sure.

Of course there is enough historical evidence to suggest that in 1794, after the Russian Empire conquered the land in the south from the Ottoman Empire, a city had been founded near the ruins of the fortress of *hadshi-bey*, and that its name referred to the existence of an ancient Greek settlement called “Odessos.” We also know that the German girl

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<sup>1</sup> This text was written as a presentation for several research seminars in Southampton and Oxford. I have decided to leave its partly improvised and colloquial character and not force it into what German colleagues call the “wissenschaftliche Korsett” – but I do hope it can still live up to the usual academic standards. Many thanks to Cristiana Facchini for her useful comments. The subtitle has been borrowed from “Welcome to Spirit of Odessa”: <http://www.odessit.com/zhenya/> (accessed 16/06/2010).

who ruled Russia at that time (Catherine the Great) took an interest in the new territory – insisting even on a female ending to the name. Catherine invited merchants and craftsmen from all over Europe to come to Odessa to build the port and the city. Both grew rapidly, and by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Odessa was the fourth largest city in the Russian Empire, after Moscow, St. Petersburg, and Warsaw, and “an interface,” as Patricia Herlihy has called it, “between Russia and the outside world.”<sup>2</sup> The 5<sup>th</sup> Duke of Richelieu, a refugee from the French Revolution, was the first governor of *Novorussija*, he fostered internal migration of Russians and Ukrainians but also encouraged the settlement of Jews (who had been living scattered throughout the region before 1794). Further, his multi-cultural growth initiatives were extended to Bulgarian immigrants and other subjects of the Ottoman Empire as well as Germans and Swiss settlers who developed agriculture in the hinterlands. Grain trade made Odessa grow, the city received the status of a free port in 1817 but lost it again in 1859. After the 1860s, some observers saw the city in decline, but it maintained an important economic role within the empire.<sup>3</sup> However, Anti-Jewish violence, pogroms, the revolution of 1905, and the subsequent wave of emigration eventually destroyed the unique cultural balance that had once existed there.

Thus the idea of Odessa has an anchor in history. But although the “Odessa myth” refers to the historical existence of the city, it also goes beyond that. One of the products of my relationship with Odessa is a small booklet published for the “Days of Jewish Culture” in Berlin in 1999. Thanks to this festival, we were able to invite our friends from Odessa – painters, singers, photographers – and we all discussed, celebrated, saw movies and plays (and swam through a sea of Vodka) for two weeks. A second product is an article published in the Yearbook for Jewish Studies at the Central European University in Budapest.<sup>4</sup> In both cases, I have widely used the virtual space of the Internet for my research into the “virtual” city of Odessa. Surfing the web can lead you to Odessa, Texas, and their football team, or to Odessa, Delaware, or indeed to a lady film star with the name of Odessa Munroe. You might

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<sup>2</sup> Patricia Herlihy, *Odessa. A History 1794-1914*, (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press 1986), preface, VII.

<sup>3</sup> Frederick W. Skinner, “Trends in Planning Practices: The Building of Odessa, 1794-1917”, in *The City in Russian History*, ed. Michael F. Hamm, (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press 1976), 139-159.

<sup>4</sup> Joachim Schlör, “Sieben Werst von der Hölle. Jüdisches Leben in Odessa”, in *Odessa Odessa. Die Stadt und ihr Traum. Eine universale Liebeserklärung aus Berlin*, ed. Shelly Kupferberg, (Berlin 1999) 23-45; Id., “‘On the Third Hand...’ News from a Rediscovered Civilization in Memories of Odessa”, CEU Jewish Studies Yearbook 2003, <http://web.ceu.hu/jewishstudies/yb03/15schlor.pdf> accessed 16/06/2010.

also find the picture of a hat called “Odessa” but in the end, you will find your way to the countless places Odessites (which is how they call themselves, rather than “Odessians”) have made their home in the last two decades. One description/definition of Odessa that I found (presumably written by nostalgic transplants) goes like this:

Odessa, located in Ukraine. According to the people who were born there, the city is the capital of the world. And since the world doesn’t know it yet, the many odessites immigrated to other countries to spread the word.<sup>5</sup>

A second entry “urban dictionary”-style entry reads:

1. A large port-city in **Ukraine**, located on the **Black sea**. Has borders with **Romania**, **Moldova**, and a sea-border with **Turkey**.
2. The cultural capital of Eastern Europe.
3. The crime capital of Eastern Europe.
4. Probably the only city in the world where **thievery** and **deception** are not only seen as normal jobs, but actually seen as kinds of art.
5. A city where presumably 40% of the population are Jews, though they would not admit it.
6. Half of the Russian humour books’ stories takes place in this city.
7. Some of the greatest thieves and robbers of all times grew-up in this city.
8. A city, whose criminals could probably buy the police of the city if they wanted to, but they shouldn’t since the police respects them.
9. A city that before the **Revolution** was tax-free, and was a center of attention for tourists, merchants, and cultural experts from all around Europe, but under the **Soviet government** lost it’s beauty and liveliness. Hopefully will rise again in the future and regain its’ greatness.
10. If you visit the city, and by the time you return nothing was stolen from you, or you still have more than half the money you came with, nobody will believe you was in Odessa.

*Ab, Odessa... The pearl of the seas*<sup>6</sup>

And this is not an isolated document. There are indeed hundreds of them, mostly found on the personal homepages of people who miss their city. Zhenya Rozinskiy headlines his homepage with – “*I came to the United States of America in 1991. I was born in Odessa in 1973.*” Likewise,

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=odessa> accessed 24/06/10.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. (spelling as in original).

Dima Fischer from Israel writes “*that’s where I lived before: Odessa.*”<sup>7</sup> What emerges from these many personal testimonies may be summed up as ‘Odessity’. The accidental echo of the word ‘city’ provides the first clue. It refers to an urban element: it means being part of an entity that is called Odessa and that exists somewhere – somewhere far away, and yet, wherever you are, you have taken a piece of it along with you, to Tel-Aviv – “*am I the only Odessite here? Please mail!*” – or to New York, Berlin, and Sydney. It is special, it distinguishes you. Its very foreign-ness does that. Obviously, Odessa is not the only city in the world to evoke such uncanny feelings of nostalgia and belonging. Perhaps we might show that it has much in common with other multi-cultural melting pots – border cities and port cities such as Trieste (Triestinità?)<sup>8</sup> and New York (the “New York state of mind” Billy Joel sings about). An Odessa Web Guest Book gathers together messages from representatives of ‘Odessity’ all over the world. Here are some of them:

- “We were impressed by the presentation of Odessa page. We are the former Odessa citizens, now living in Melbourne, would like to maintain contacts odessitami.”
- “I found the Odessa page in the internet. It is great. Thank you very much from all the Odessits abroad.”
- “A couple days ago I typed ‘Odessa’ just for fun in the Netscape’s Netsearch and came across odessit.com site. This is really great that you have the pictures of our beautiful city there.”
- “As Odessit, I like your homepage very much, it appealed to me.”
- “You have a very cool homepage. I’m from Odessa as well!”
- “I’ve stumbled upon your web page, and wanted to thank you. What a tribute to my favorite city! Your Odessa page made me feel so nostalgic...”
- “I like your page very much and I’m proud of us, people from Odessa.”
- “This stuff is great. I feel at home!!! Thank you for this, and good luck!!! God bless Odessa!!! (I esli vru tak shab ya zdoh!)”
- “You actually warmed up hearts of many of us who left Odessa. For the rest of my ZEMLYAKI! Dear odessits, let’s stay in touch and even reunite more often, we all share the same love to ODESSA.”

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<sup>7</sup> “Welcome to Spirit of Odessa”: <http://www.odessit.com/zhenya/> accessed 16/06/2010.

<sup>8</sup> See Katia Pizzi, “Quale Triestinità? Voices and Echoes from Italian Trieste”, in *Kosovelova Poetika/ Kosovel’s Poetics*, special issue of *Primerjalna književnost* 28 (2005), 239-249; University of London, Institute for Germanic and Romance Studies, IGRS Staff Papers (<http://sas-space.sas.ac.uk/658/>); Angelo Ara, Claudio Magris, *Triest. Eine literarische Hauptstadt in Mitteleuropa*, (München : Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag), 2007.

- “I can’t thank you enough for this little piece of home away from home. I now reside in Kansas City and miss Odessa too much.”
- “I loved the pictures. I suddenly felt a rush of nostalgia. We definitely used to live in one of the most beautiful cities in the world. Too bad we couldn’t take it with us. But the memories are always with us.”
- “Finally there is a page to meet old friends and hear native language.”
- “Spasiba! It is so good to feel that your past is not so away and maybe not away at all.”
- “Greetings to surfers in Odessa from the Pearl of the Orient!” [from Hong Kong]
- “Oh boy! Let me hold my tears there. [...] I consider it being a gift to be from Odessa. And here you are as proud as I am. We have a lot in common (who knows maybe relatives or enemies at least).”
- “There is no one in the whole entire world like a true Odessit! I am very glad that such site does exist, the site where you can become young again.”<sup>9</sup>

And so on. “*Too bad we couldn’t take it with us!*” - some people even exclaim. Quite reasonably, what constitutes the charm and allure of Odessa – and the historically positive image of the city (particularly in Jewish contexts) – has perhaps less to do with the 19<sup>th</sup> century reality of the place than the with *mythos* evoked by certain émigré writers and publicists in Palestine beginning in the 1920s.<sup>10</sup> Of course, ‘Odessa’ is an invention, an image, a longing – just like that ‘certain Berlin’ of the 1920s, the ‘Paris de lumière,’ or any other image of a city that has been remoulded in literature.<sup>11</sup> As a cultural historian I am of course interested in the ‘reality’, and I have the deepest respect for archives, and especially for the work of the wonderful Lilia Belausova in the State Region Archives of Odessa (housed in the former Brody Synagogue). But I also know that ‘historical’ realities, reconstructed from archival sources, especially when they concern whole cities, are no less ‘invented’ than the personal memories found in autobiographies or the testimony given in literary depictions by authors from Pushkin to Babel, Katayev and even more contemporary writers.<sup>12</sup> Portraits and the literary imaginings of

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<sup>9</sup> <http://odessa.lk.net/english/forum/geobook.html> accessed 16/06/2010.

<sup>10</sup> See Nicolas V. Iljine ed., *Odessa Memories* (Samuel and Althea Stroum Book, Seattle, Wash.: University of Washington Press, 2003).

<sup>11</sup> For Berlin, see publications by Michael Bienert, *Die eingebildete Metropole. Berlin im Feuilleton der Weimarer Republik*, (Stuttgart: Metzler 1992) and his very impressive website <http://www.text-der-stadt.de/> (accessed May 4, 2011); for Paris, cf. Karlheinz Stierle, *Der Mythos von Paris. Zeichen und Bewußtsein der Stadt*, (München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag 1998).

<sup>12</sup> There is no complete literary history of Odessa as yet, but the homepage of the State Museum of Literature provides very useful information: <http://museum.odessa.net/litmuseum/english/> (accessed May 4, 2011).

Odessa may even prove to be more powerful as evidence and ultimately more reliable than motivated selections and historical re-constructions. This is why I would like to present not yet another history of the city, but a different conceptual approach that attempts to integrate the various temporal and spatial layers.

In any case, there *is* something different about Odessa. I couldn't – and I guess I wouldn't – start the introduction to any other (serious) city – Berlin, London, Jerusalem – in this way. But this difference in perception brings us closer to the heart of our question. Yes, this has been a multi-ethnic city from the outset, with Jewish, Greek, Armenian, French, Italian, German and Russian communities, and I will discuss this point more in detail in a few pages. But the dynamic ideal and lasting impression of the city is that it – she, rather – managed to turn each of these communities into “Odessites.” Although in reality this harmonious diversity is long gone, the ideal, the dream survived, and lives on today, in the coffeehouses of Tel-Aviv, on the banks of Brighton Beach in Brooklyn, or in the “Odessa Club” on Berlin's Mulackstraße.

Indeed, I had my first experience with this special nostalgia for Odessa in a café in Tel-Aviv. You ask people where they immigrated from, and the usual reaction might be interest, or disdain, or pity, when they say “Berlin” or “Warsaw” or maybe “Baghdad.” But when they say “Odessa,” then somehow everyone at the table leans back, smiling, and says: “Ach, Odessa. That's different.”

Amos Elon has described Jerusalem as a “City of Mirrors” where all inhabitants see themselves in the eyes of the other, where all religions confront each other only to injure themselves, where Israelis and Palestinians fight for the same piece of earth, whereas Tel-Aviv has been compared to a white canvas on which all newcomers would paint their

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This is how “Odessa Tourism” presents the place: “The two hundred year history of Odessa has included about 300 distinguished writers, all represented in the 24 halls of Odessa Literature Museum, established in 1977. Located near Deribasovskaya Street and the Odessa Opera House this magnificent palace with luxuriant halls was designed by L. Otton. The former mansion of Prince Gagarin now exists as part of the city's cultural life. The building itself has belonged to the Odessa Literature and Artistic Society since the beginning of the XX century. Pushkin, Gogol, Mitskevich, Babel, Franko, Lesya Ukrainka, Korolenko, Bunin, Katayev, Kotsyubinskyy, Bagritskyy, Olesha, Ilf & Petrov... This list of the most eminent writers can be continued, and one can see personal belongings, autographs of the writers, first editions of their books, engravings, age-old placards, and rare issues of Odessa newspapers in the museum... Visitors can smile at the sight of a funny drawing of Yuriy Olesha and see a cap that once belonged to Ilya Ilf. The Literature Museum is finely decorated and each hall has its peculiar characteristics.”

(<http://www.odessatourism.in.ua/en/dostoprimechatelnosti/muzeynayaprogulka/literaturnymuzeyktobkogdavodesseplnoy/default.aspx?full=1>)

own colours.<sup>13</sup> What, then, could be a fitting metaphor for Odessa? It is a stage. It is a market place. It is a spa. It is a ride on a bus with twelve different passengers, or maybe it is also a phone directory. But first the bus:

“One of the most striking features of ‘homo odessiensis’ is a sense of humor, paired with a weirdly laid-back attitude to situations which most Western Europeans would find unbearable. A quick sample. It is hot and sticky on the eight-seated minibus service running past Privoz [the market], in the middle of rush hour. Constantly, passengers of varying sizes and circumferences push past each other, trying to get in and out. There is an average of twelve passengers on the bus at any one time. The driver makes little jokes and warns every new arrival that due to a closed road he is going to have to make a detour and that traveling with him means taking part in an experiment. Every hundred meters he has to stop to fill up the water in the radiator. An ancient tram wobbles up to the back bumper and impatiently rings its bell. Two young girls on the back seat giggle away like a pair of hens, an old woman constantly shoves everyone, the airlessness on the bus increases, outside, the temperature is above 30°C – but everyone stays calm. Only one elderly gentleman fidgets in his seat and gets off the bus at the earliest possible stop. Upon which the driver dryly comments, ‘That one has failed the experiment!’ The comment is greeted with great hilarity.”<sup>14</sup>

The internationality of Odessa today – spread over the whole world – reflects, I would say, its former *internal* internationality. And we can, for the purpose of this paper, imagine the six or eight or twelve people on the bus as the different minorities in the city, the southern outlet and outpost of the Empire. The drivers change, from Catherine the Great and her first governor, the duc de Richelieu, through the long list of governors and mayors in the 19<sup>th</sup> century up to the prominent figures of the Revolution, of Soviet Odessa and the post-Soviet period in the Ukraine with mayor Eduard Gurwitz (who is Jewish in fact, but wants to be called an “Odessit” first). I went to Odessa for the first time in 1993, with the idea that it would help me to better understand Tel-Aviv.

#### *1993 Diary*

*Anyone coming here with an old map of the town has been dealt a good hand. The streets have been given back their old names, which evoke the history that has gone*

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<sup>13</sup> Amos Elon, *Jerusalem: City of Mirrors*, (Boston: Little, Brown 1989); Joachim Schlör, *Tel-Aviv: From Dream to City*, (London: Reaktion Books 1999).

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.odessaglobe.com/english/books/odessa-facetten-einer-stadt-im-wandel.html> accessed 16/06/2010.

*before, that may return, that is certainly longed for. The ethnic groups, Greeks, Armenians, Jews, who were responsible for Odessa's economic rise, unparalleled elsewhere in Europe, are once again represented on the street maps, though they are hardly visible as segments of the population – but that may change. Anything may change. The names of the city's founders, of Catherine and her first governor, Count Richelieu, are back. The Café Richelieu at the top of the great Steps has gone, but the desire for a new café in the city centre was voiced soon after the collapse of communism [and has now been fulfilled, in a peculiar way, by a restaurant calling itself 'Déjà-Vu' which uses Soviet and American memorabilia to recreate the Cold War, something I would not have expected in 1993]. Walking (or riding on a bus) like this, hesitantly, associatively, in circles, down one street, back up another, is the only way to explore this Odessa, for the guidebooks are even more confused than anyone else.*

This is, quite obviously, an effect of the long period of time that has passed since the Odessa's heyday and the immense gap in memory that has resulted. There is no living memory – we have to search for evidence in old books and memoirs. In terms of Jewish history and memory, this is quite a common sight in many European cities: People trying to “read” a former presence into derelict houses, or even celebrating “Jewish culture” in places where Jews no longer live, in Berlin's Scheunenviertel, in the former ghetto of Venice, in Krakow's Kazimierz district.

Metaphors can only take you so far. But still, let us try to formulate some questions. How did the passengers on our bus interact with each other? How did they communicate? What were the languages spoken among them? What were the fields of co-operation between them, and which were the areas of conflict? Maria Vassilikou, in her very important study on Greek-Jewish inter-ethnic relations in Odessa,<sup>15</sup> shows us the two sides of this coin quite clearly. Yes, there was a great deal of fruitful collaboration between Jewish and Greek merchants at port, but there was also an important complicity between the two rising national movements. Jews learned from Greeks; when the Greek community built a girls' school, so did the Jewish community soon afterwards. At the same time however – and in spite of so many productive and amicable relationships - anti-Jewish violence was still known to flare up around Greek orthodox holidays.

What were the differences of use of the city's space? Did Moldovians live in Moldavanka, Greeks on Greckaja Street, Jews on Evreskaja Street, and Germans in Lustdorf or Friedrichsruhe? Was there intermarriage

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<sup>15</sup> Maria Vassilikou, “Greeks and Jews in Salonika and Odessa: Inter-ethnic Relations in Cosmopolitan Port Cities”, in *Port Jews: Jewish Communities in Cosmopolitan Maritime Trading Centres, 1550–1950*, ed. David Cesarani, (London: Frank Cass Publishers 2002), 155-172.



and conversion, and in which way did these developments help to shape and inform the cosmopolitan “odessit” (for whom identity was not necessarily derived from nationality)? Does the fact that the passengers on our bus make up such a diverse crowd have a positive or rather a negative impact on the development of the city? Most of the sources I (and others<sup>16</sup>) have found tend toward the former. But there are some critical voices as well, assembled by Patricia Herlihy in her groundbreaking *Odessa: A History, 1794-1914*, published in 1986. She quotes a Russian émigré from 1854: “I cannot say that the society of Odessa was the most agreeable. Through this mixture of nationalities, there were a great many closed circles and coteries, and no extensive society.”<sup>17</sup> And Herlihy comments:

All the ethnic communities resisted assimilation, but all were touched by the city’s cultural ferment. Odessa, for example, was an early home to reform movements within Judaism and of Zionism. The Greek society for national liberation, the *Hetairia*, also found a supportive atmosphere in the city. Nationalists – Bulgarians, Poles, Ukrainians – as well as Decembrists formed conspirational groups in the city. Italian stores exhibited signs such as ‘Evviva Garibaldi’ or ‘Evviva l’Unità d’Italia’. When, for example, a Masonic lodge was founded in Odessa in 1817, its membership included several government officials – even Langeron! [Count Louis Alexandre Andrault de Langéron, governor of New Russia, 1815-1823] A German doctor declared that Odessa was the freest city in Russia. [...] But there were disadvantages in the cultural mix as well. The ethnic communities, looking inward, never formed a united and effective political front. As the German Dr. Kohl observed, ‘the heterogeneous character of the population may perhaps account for its more than common deficiency in public spirit.’ The cosmopolitan composition of the city, which charmed so many visitors, hampered but did not halt the city’s physical and cultural development.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> See Alexis Hofmeister, *Selbstorganisation und Bürgerlichkeit. Jüdisches Vereinswesen in Odessa um 1900* (Schriften des Simon-Dubnow-Instituts,—Bd. 8), Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 2007); Tanja Pentec, *Odessa 1917. Revolution an der Peripherie*, (Cologne and Weimar: Böhlau 2000); Karl Schlögel, “The Sidewalk. Pavement. Surfaces. Hieroglyphics”, in his *Rendering Time according to Space. Geopolitics and the History of Civilization*, translated by Nedra E. Bickham, <http://www.litrix.de/mmo/priv/10952-WEB.pdf> accessed 24/06/10.

<sup>17</sup> Patricia Herlihy, *Odessa. A history 1794-1914*, (Cambridge, Mass.: distributed by Harvard University Press for the Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute 1986), 129.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

Such debates about the positive and negative aspects of the “cultural mix” can be found in other port cities of the period.<sup>19</sup> They can be seen as early laboratories for cosmopolitanism, a concept usually ascribed to later periods. But this kind of cosmopolitanism – which seemed to work well in terms of business arrangements, trading, and even inter-cultural connections, was not strong enough to create a lasting atmosphere of tolerance and freedom. As we will see with the following examples, “Odessity” became stuck in the struggles between nationalities and nationalism.

### On Evrejskaja Street

The first street on our bus tour is Evreskaja, the Jewish Street, and I will stay here much longer than in the other places.<sup>20</sup> Steven Zipperstein was the first (in 1985) to research the history of “The Jews of Odessa” and I can only point every reader to this valid and incredibly relevant book that traces the history and development of the Odessian Jewry from the earliest settlements to the Enlightenment period (beginning around 1840), to the building of the Brody synagogue and the succession of rabbis (Rabbi Schwabacher most memorable among them), to the pogroms of 1871 and 1881 and the emergence of Zionism with Leon Pinsker’s *Auto-Emancipation*, 14 years before Theodor Herzl’s *Der Judenstaat*. The “Odessa Committee,” part of the Zionist “Hovevei Zion” group founded in Odessa in 1882, was partly responsible for the foundation of the city of Tel-Aviv in 1909, and supported the famous Herzlija High School, the first public building in the young Hebrew city. Important political and cultural figures – from Mayor Meir Dizengoff to the thinker Ahad Ha’am, the poet Chaim Nachman Bialik and the city’s historian Asher Drujanow – had come from Odessa. What is today a street name in Tel-Aviv, had once been a home a house in Odessa.<sup>21</sup>

### 1993 Diary

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<sup>19</sup> *Jewish Culture and History*, vol. 4.2, Special Issue: *Port Jews. Jewish Communities in Cosmopolitan Maritime Trading Centres*, ed. David Cesarani; David Cesarani, Gemma Romain, eds., *Jews and Port Cities 1590-1990. Commerce, Community and Cosmopolitanism*, (London: Valentine Mitchell 2006).

<sup>20</sup> See for an overview Steven M. Zipperstein, *The Jews of Odessa. A Cultural History, 1794-1881*, (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press 1985); Id. *Elusive Prophet. Ahad Ha’am and the Origins of Zionism*, (Los Angeles: University of California Press 1993); Id., “Remapping Odessa, Rewriting Cultural History”, *Jewish Social Studies* New series 2/2 (1996): 21-37; for the early reform period see Alexander Orbach, *New Voices of Russian Jewry: A Study of the Russian-Jewish Press of Odessa in the Era of Great Reforms, 1860-1871*, (Leiden: Brill 1980).

<sup>21</sup> This is very well documented at

<http://www.moria.farlep.net/vjodessa/en/palest.html> accessed 16/06/2010.

*The texts in my luggage are mainly by Jewish authors. My idea, as I walk around Odessa, is that the literature and history of the city's Jews might be appropriate keys to an understanding of the place.*

*The houses themselves have little to tell; the numerous memorial plaques give a false picture. I have with me the memoirs of the Jewish historian Shimon Dubnow, who in 1942 was murdered by the National Socialists in Riga. In his flat in Odessa, "in a large room looking out onto the sea", representatives of a Jewish-nationalist, Zionist-orientated movement used to meet together, by no means united on all points but certainly united in the struggle against rising anti-Semitism. There was Abad Ha'am, "striding up and down the long room, holding his usual cigarette or a glass of tea"; the advocate of a cultural, spiritual form of Zionism; he went to Tel-Aviv in the early 1920s, where his house, close to the Hebrew Gymnasium, became a meeting-place and his library was to form the basis of today's city library, Beit Ariela. There was "the energetic Dizengoff," who came to Jaffa on the Ruslan in 1904, became the spokesman of a group calling itself Achusath Bayit which, with a loan from the Jewish National Fund, built the first sixty houses of the settlement that was named Tel-Aviv, and was mayor of his city until his death in 1936. And there was, "furthermore, the secretary of the Palestine Committee, the lively and active Druyanov," who was to write, in the 1940s, the first book about the new city, *Sefer Tel-Aviv*. "I believe," writes Dubnow, "that among those who attended those meetings of ours I first saw the young Chaim Nachman Bialik." Bialik came to the old-new land in 1924 after first spending three years in Berlin, and his house was to be the first and most important meeting place for the Hebrew culture that was developing in Tel-Aviv, and a place of pilgrimage for all visitors to Palestine."<sup>22</sup>*

*What all this indicates is that Odessa was a vital staging-post on the Jewish road to Israel. Here I discover how much more is to be found in Odessa than mere pre-history. On the front of Bialik's house at number 9, Vorovskogo Street (previously and now once again called Malaya Arnautskaya) is the bust of a bald man wearing glasses, but surely that cannot be Bialik? No, it is Lenin's brother. A woman coming out of the vehicle entrance to the courtyard looks at me with surprise and slight amusement as I take a picture, apparently photographing the bust but really thinking of the house and of another man whose bust is not here and about whom she knows nothing. She tells her neighbour about me. On my next visit the memorial to Lenin's brother has been ripped out with symbolic violence and the hole roughly filled in.*

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<sup>22</sup> The quotations are from Dubnow's autobiography "My Life" (Kniga zhizni, Russian edition Wilna 1930-1937) which has been published, in German, in a critical edition in three volumes: Verena Dohrn ed., *Shimon Dubnow. Buch meines Lebens. Bände 1-3*, (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 2005).



*In the afternoon, on the fringes of central Odessa, at the very foot of the hill on which the inner city stands, beyond a railway underpass and past a dreary market, I found the ruined old synagogue. I had heard about it, but when I saw the collapsed walls I was so shaken that the man who had guided me the last part of the way quickly made himself scarce. Only the wall that once held the ark containing the Torah is still standing, and an inscription is partly legible, but the rest, which collapsed simply from weakness, without any external cause, is mere rubble. In the front section, formerly a vestibule, the old Odessa community still has a small synagogue; an old man was asking, in Yiddish, for donations. Beside the synagogue is a matzah bakery, selling much better matzah than the matzah sent from America: after all, this comes from Odessa. A Ukrainian family, lodged in another part of the building, begrudgingly allows me to take photographs.*

*On that occasion I went back up the hill feeling discouraged, but there was little time to dwell on my disappointment. From this point on, things were to happen in rapid succession, meetings and conversations with different individuals one after the other at a such a breath-taking speed that I want to take the time now, in retrospect, to recall that moment of doubt and disillusionment, that feeling which accompanies every journey and is as much a part of it as the anticipation. It will be no good, what's the point of coming here, you're chasing a shadow, to find out anything about the Jews of Odessa you need to go to Brooklyn or Tel-Aviv, here everything is dead and fallen into ruins, it's cold and there's a long road ahead of you. This mood lasted only for a few minutes, but it is an important part of the story.*

*I had arranged to meet an interpreter in front of the Museum of Literature. With Galina, I went into the museum and paid 120 kupyony for the two of us to take the*

*guided tour. Then the door opened and Lena appeared and a whole new world opened up. I listed all the things I wanted to hear about: Odessa in literature, descriptions of Odessa, the city whose image was inseparable from water, the city as a trading port, the Jewish city, the pre-history of Tel-Aviv – this last above all. It seemed and still seems to me most improbable that I should find out precisely what interested me most, but at that point Lena moved her scarf to one side, revealing a Star of David hanging on the chain around her neck, and said: “You’ve come to the right place.” After two minutes we were speaking English to one another. It was difficult for Galina, but she came with us all the same. The museum has twenty galleries, and we saw seventeen of them. The earliest texts about Odessa, accounts by French travellers, the first book printed in Odessa, the first book about Odessa to be published in Odessa. The museum was erected in 1984, at the start of the Gorbachev’s administration; it was the result of a private initiative – the first of many such initiatives in an era which saw the dismantling of many state-sponsored institutions. From the beginning it contained some elements of criticism, but they were small and timid and in those early years any critic faced the threat of KGB censorship. The creator of the collection wanted to follow in the tradition of the city’s literary salons, to present Odessa as a city of literature, a city of books, and to use this building to show the way. The twenty rooms are dedicated to particular themes, and so we walked through salons, debating societies, bookshops and libraries. We walked through a city and it was like reading the chapters in a book, a chronicle of the descriptions and journeys and also a chronicle of wonder: what a city!*

*Lena’s commentary on the museum often ran counter to protocol, adding here, omitting there. Isaak Babel had been accorded only a meagre display cabinet, but Lena’s account of that room was devoted solely to him. She showed a similar deference to Bagritzky, Ilf and Petrov. The heroes of socialist literature in their big glass cases seemed to shrivel up, growing smaller and smaller in the face of the literary truth catching up with them, overtaking them, banishing them to their corners. One small case contains Isaak Babel’s spectacles. Apparently when his wife brought the glasses to him in prison, the NKVD told her he won’t be needing them anymore.*

We met with Anja Misjuk and her husband Mark Naidorf. (In the meantime, Anja has become an expert on Jewish life and history in Odessa.) As we talked, the four of us probed ever deeper into the idea (and the soul) of Odessa. What does literature tell us about the essence of the city? According to Roshanna P. Sylvester, “In his 1913 guide to the city, Grigorii Moskvich wrote that the dream of the ‘essential Odessan’ was to strike it rich and immediately acquire a house, a carriage, and everything else he needed to ‘transform himself (by appearance, of course) into an impeccable British gentleman or blue-blooded Viennese aristocrat’”. She comments further that “Odessans are proud of themselves (not without foundation), flaunting their ability to dress as well as any purebred Parisian or Viennese.” Some places only become real cities when they acquire nicknames that refer to other cities:

this was the case with Tel-Aviv, which some people in the 1920s called ‘Lodz-sur-Mer,’ while others said: “Tel-Aviv? Jeszcze piękniejsze od Paryża!” [Even more beautiful than Paris!] The mirror, no matter how pale or artificially gilded, still reflects the image. “The Odessan was obsessed with appearances giving little regard to ‘spiritual development’ or ‘the inner content of public life,’ the writer complained.” They were “capricious,” “fickle,” preoccupied with fashion, interested only in profit, defined – Sylvester quotes Moskvich’s words once more – by “the passion for quick enrichment, the spirit of enterprise and a rare resourcefulness and shrewdness in business.”<sup>23</sup>

“Obsessed with image” – this was, of course, meant to indicate the superficiality and preoccupation with externals of an urban culture that was spiritually and intellectually inferior to that of St Petersburg, Moscow, Kiev, Warsaw “or even Khar’kov.” Sylvester’s study of the popular press gives ample confirmation of that picture. But in one of the passages she quotes, which are of course intended as criticisms, there lurks an idea which may help us to understand why, despite all these negative judgements, memory has preserved such a positive image of Odessa. One columnist complained that Odessa’s civil society was dominated by the “middle class *meshchanstvo*,” aspirants to what Jeffrey Brooks has called the “new” intelligentsia, people with “cultural pretensions” who “wanted their tastes to be recognized as legitimate [...], wanted to be included in the cultural life largely dominated by the old intelligentsia.” Noting the growing ‘prosperity’ of a new middle class, these journalists felt that they had a pedagogic duty to foster the necessary ‘spiritual development’ to go with it. This was an honourable aim and it is, as I have said, well documented by Sylvester, with a wealth of examples. But here, inspired by no less an authority than Theodor Herzl and his defence of the petty bourgeoisie as the “yeast” of the city,<sup>24</sup> I would like to speak up for “cultural pretensions.” The operative word is “wanted”: “people who wanted their tastes to be recognised.” To me this suggests intention, energy, ambition. What was about to be pedagogically taken in hand and improved was a kind of raw state, something unfinished, still in the making, expectant. Pretension there

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<sup>23</sup> R. P. Sylvester, “Making an Appearance: Urban ‘Types’ and the Creation of Respectability in Odessa’s Popular Press, 1912–1914”, *Slavic Review* 59 (Winter 2000): 802–24, 802.

<sup>24</sup> In a feuilleton titled “The Exhibition of the Treasure” Theodor Herzl writes about Paris: “You don’t know France if you’re not familiar with her magnificent petty bourgeois. They are the true wealth, the courage, the greatness, the future of this country [...]. They are joyous, diligent and enlightened.” Quoted in the “structured overview” (38) of Theodor Herzl, *Journalistic Stories. Feuilletons*, Edited, selected, translated and with notes by Henry Regensteiner, (Cranbury NJ: Rosemont 2002).

was, certainly, but also a kind of innocence.<sup>25</sup> That civilising mission (which incidentally, with a strange parallelism, has reappeared today among those who seek to protect their image of Odessa from its current immigrants and their ignorance of the city's past) aimed to overcome that innocence, and it cannot be criticised for that. But I would like to argue that that sense of innocence, of expectancy, of hope, has survived as an 'Odessa feeling' among those who emigrated.

The accusation of false pretension, an attitude of mind which according to Ahad Ha'am, for instance, was characteristic of the city's Jews, was not unjustified. But perhaps such criticism failed to recognise what energy, what potential lies in this apparent 'falseness'. Jewish Palestine, born in Odessa, was animated by similar notions of perfectibility, ideas about the 'new man' and the 'new Jew' who would build up a perfect society of farmers and warriors and forget about life in the Diaspora. But History cunningly ensured that the experiences of impatience, of starting afresh, of pretension, of life in the Diaspora, came in with the immigrants and turned Israel into the multi-faceted society it is today.

Vladimir Ze'ev Jabotinsky celebrated this heritage. Politically correct persons cringe when they hear the name. Jabotinsky? Isn't he the spiritual father of Begin, Sharon and the Etzel – terrorists, dreamers of a Greater Israel? But political correctness, I am sorry to say, has no place in Odessa. For my guides in Odessa, Anja and Lena, and maybe for the entire city, he is the most important journalist and writer of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. His book *Patero*, [The Five] – originally published in Russian in 1936 – was only recently translated into English by Michael Katz, with the assistance of Anja Misjuk. Writing about the "springtime" of his life and of his city, "our carefree Black Sea capital with acacias growing along its steep banks," Jabotinsky chronicles the lives of five children in the Milgrom family and their different orientations, choices, and fates. In the background, Odessa gleams. Their stories are intimately related to the city of their birth and experience. All this is set before the background of a beloved city:

"To the present day, if I squint, I can recall, albeit through a mist that obscures the details, that large square, a monument to the noble architecture of foreign masters of the first third of the nineteenth century, and witness to the serene elegance of the old-fashioned taste of the first builders of our town – Richelieu, de Ribas, Vorontsov, and the

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<sup>25</sup> For the cultural interpretation of the "gangster" images, see also Matthias Stadelman, "Von jüdischen Ganoven zu sowjetischen Helden: Odessas Wandlungen in den Liedern Leonid Utesovs", *Jahrbuch des Simon-Dubnow-Instituts* 2 (2003): 333-358.

entire pioneering generation of merchants and smugglers with their Italian and Greek surnames. Ahead of me – the front staircase to the municipal library and, on the left, against the background of a broad, almost boundless bay, is the peristyle of the Duma: neither would disgrace Corinth or Pisa. To the right, I see the first houses on Italian Street, in my time known as Pushkin Street, since it was there the poet wrote Onegin; turning around, there is the English Club, and farther off in the distance, the left façade of the municipal theatre: these were built at different times but all with one and the same love of *the foreign spirit of the city* (Roman and Hellenistic) with its incomprehensible name, as if borrowed from the legend of a kingdom ‘to the east of the sun and west of the moon.’<sup>26</sup>

In the next citation Jabotinsky describes a meeting with the other members of the literary circle in Odessa, and he notes something very important for our question:

“Looking back at all this some thirty years later, I think that the most curious thing about it was the good-natured fraternization of nationalities. All eight or ten tribes of old Odessa met in that club, and in fact it never occurred to anyone, even in silence, to note who was who. All this changed a few years later, but at the dawn of the last century we genuinely got along.”<sup>27</sup>

It is not really important whether or not this account is true. This is the image he had in mind – of a city (and a youth, an innocence) lost. The “foreign spirit” of the city made it a possible home for everyone who was foreign. In 1897 – one year before Jabotinsky left Odessa for the first time – one counted circa 17 babies and 123 children between the ages of one and nine years for every one hundred Jewish mothers, 13 and 96 for the Russian mothers, 12 and 75 for Ukrainians, 10 and 55 for the Poles, 8 and 62 for the Germans. Let’s return to our bus and see what happened in other parts of the city.

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<sup>26</sup> Vladimir Jabotinsky, *The Five. A Novel of Jewish Life in Turn-of-the-Century Odessa*, Translated from the Russian by Michael R. Katz, (Ithaca and London: Cornell UP 2005), 14-15 [my italics, JS].

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.



### On Puschkinskaja and Greckaja Streets

With enlightenment and modernisation, Odessa became more of a Russian-speaking city. Although the Chief Rabbi of Odessa, Schwabacher, who came from a black forest town in Germany, never gave up his tradition of delivering sermons in German, his community moved towards the Russian language. One product of this development is the emergence of a Russian-Jewish literature, or a Jewish literature in Russian, with its main exponent in Isaac Babel. Although he is one of the most important Jewish writers of his generation, and although the stories such as “How it was done in Odessa” have their Jewish heroes, gangsters and thieves, Babel insists on Odessa's inherent *Russianness*,” as Janneke van de Stadt has put it. In Babel’s own words:

“Aside from the gentlemen who bring [to Petersburg] a little sun and many sardines in exotic wrapping, I believe we shall soon see the fecund, vital influence of the Russian South, the Russian Odessa--perhaps (*qui sait?*), the only city in Russia where a Russian Maupassant whom need so much may be born. Small signs are tickling in already auguring the future: I have in mind the Odessa singers (Iza Kremer in particular), with their small voice but full of joy, beautifully expressed joy, with their vigor, lightness of touch, and their charming – now melancholy, now touching – feeling for life – good, mean and extraordinarily – *quand même et malgré tout* – interesting ...”<sup>28</sup>

Next to Babel, there is Anna Akhmatova, pseudonym of Anna Andreyevna Gorenko, born 1889 in Bolshoy Fontan. She died in 1966 in Domodedovo, near Moscow, and is considered the greatest female poet in Russian literature. In August 1946, she was harshly denounced by the Central Committee of the Communist Party for her ‘eroticism, mysticism, and political indifference’ – another way of interpreting these remarks is to see the influence of the Odessa myth on her style. Today Moscow seems far away since the whole political geography of the region changed so dramatically after the fall of the Soviet Union.

But “far away” is a somewhat unfitting qualification for Odessa. In geographical terms, Athens is quite far away – but for a while (like Tel-Aviv which didn’t even exist yet) the Greek capital seems to have been part of the Odessa matrix. Historically, the opening of the Black Sea grain trade to Western Europe and the Near East during the early nineteenth century “gave impetus to a large Greek immigration to the

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<sup>28</sup> Isaac Babel, *Odessa. My Notes* (1916); see also Janneke van de Stadt, “A Question of Place: Situating Old Shloime in Isaac Babel’s Oeuvre”, *The Russian Review* 66/1 (2007): 36-54.

Black Sea coast. One can get a good picture of the Greeks for whom change was attractive by looking at the members of the conspiracy of 1821. The original instigators of the uprising were members of a secret society called the *Philike Hetairia* or ‘friendly society.’<sup>29</sup> Like other lodges that were fraternal groups or self-help associations made up of merchants, writes Steven W. Sowards, “the society copied the Freemasons in its elaborate rituals, ranks and secrecy, but its true purpose was revolt. The three founders of *Philike Hetairia* are representative. One was the son of a Greek fur dealer living in Moscow, who already had been a member of a Greek society while living in Paris. The second was a Greek merchant from Odessa, another veteran of an anti-Turkish secret lodge. The third was a merchant from the Ionian Islands, a member of a Masonic lodge there who had contacts in the National Guard created by the British provisional government. In their merchant associations and their connections to the outside world, these three were typical of the members who put together the plot.”<sup>30</sup> In 1819, out of 452 members, 153 identified themselves as merchants and shippers, 60 as notables, 36 as soldiers, 24 as priests, 23 as minor officials, 22 as teachers or students, 10 as doctors, 4 as lawyers and 16 as men with other professions. These people formed part of a movement for Greek independence from the Ottoman Empire which was finally granted in 1832.

According to Patricia Herlihy, although the Ukrainian population in Odessa was small, the city played a significant role in the Ukrainian national movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the 1860s, a branch of “Hromada” (Society) was founded in Odessa, on the model of an earlier one founded in Kiev. The repressions of 1875 and 1876 and especially the ban on the use of the Ukrainian language in publications put an end to their political agitation. It was only after 1905 that the movement’s popular appeal was strengthened by the foundation of a library and a bookstore. Also in 1860, a Bulgarian presence made itself known when “120 deputies of the people petitioned the Apostolic Delegate to receive them into the Roman Church on condition of the recognition of their language and liturgy, and the appointment of a bishop of their own nationality; almost 60,000 of their fellow-countrymen joined in the request. Pius IX himself, 21 January, 1861, consecrated a priest named Solkolski its first Vicar Apostolic of Uniat Bulgaria. This movement, however, did not win the support of Catholic Europe, while the greatest obstacles were placed in its way by Russia and

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<sup>29</sup> Steven W. Sowards (Michigan State University), *Twenty-Five Lectures on Modern Balkan History*, Lecture 6: The Greek Revolution and the Greek State. <http://staff.lib.msu.edu/sowards/balkan/lecture6.html> accessed 16/06/2010.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

the patriarchate of Constantinople. Sokolski lapsed back into schism in June, 1861, and embarked for Odessa on a Russian vessel; the majority of the Bulgarian priests and laymen attached themselves to the recently founded national exarchate.”<sup>31</sup> In Sofia we find the statues of Evlogi and Hristo Georgievi. The Georgiev brothers made their fortunes in in the nineteenth-century in Odessa, then used their wealth to fund the establishment of Bulgarian-language schools. Their place in the country’s cultural pantheon assured, they now bask on the steps of Bulgaria’s biggest university like a pair of contented walruses. Onward from here (not Sofia, but Odessa, remember we’re still on that bus...) to a very surprising place in the city.

### **The Italian Club**

Anna Makolkin’s study *A History of Odessa, the Last Italian Black Sea Colony* reconstructs – in the publisher’s words – “the Italian protohistory of Odessa.” This is a different version of our story:

“Odessa, founded in 1794 by the immigrants from Genoa and Naples, Venice and Palermo. For the first time and upon the lengthy and elaborate archival research in Italy and Ukraine, the Odessa of Alexander Pushkin and Anna Akhmatova, battleship Potemkin and Eisenstein, Babel and Kandinsky enters European historiography as a world of the dynasties of De Ribas and Frapoliies, Rossies and Bubbas, Bernadazzies and Riznich, Molinaries, Iorini *et al.* Having revised the narratives of the tzarist, Soviet, pre-perestroika and post-Communist past, the monograph not only reclaims the first Italian settlers, but examines the process of forging Europeanness, a cultural identity, beyond the traditional East and West, nation and people. European culture has been notably influenced by Italian civilization, and Odessa is one of the important manifestations of this phenomenon. The book places this 18th century Italian migration to the Black Sea into various contexts- the ancient porto-franco, the 12th-14th century Crimea, the persecution of Jesuits and Jews, Risorgimento and Romantic Europe. It challenges the post-modern concept of colonialism by presenting the colonial Other through history and philosophy, semiotics and architecture, history of art and musicology. This history of Odessa not only reveals the neglected European past but imagines the future of the European continent, explaining the role of migration and mechanism of cultural transport.”<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/03046a.htm> (Catholic Encyclopedia)

<sup>32</sup> Anna Makolkin, *A History of Odessa, the Last Italian Black Sea Colony*, (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press 2004);

Michael Ukas writes in a review of the book: “The materials about this obscure migration have been scattered in archives of Italy and Ukraine, and most 19th and 20th century historians, intimidated by radical nationalism, politics and geopolitics of Europe, and post-colonial trends did not have sufficient courage to address the topic. Italians were not just another wave of Odessa immigrants, not just another part of her multicultural mosaic, they were her founders and colonizers of the region.” Makolkin’s research “fills the gap in the European historiography about the unknown, atypical and underestimated Italian migration which was instrumental in Europeanizing rural and backward Russia, at the time of mass migration from Europe to North America. Reconstructing the early history of the port and reclaiming Odessa’s Italianness, the author not simply restores the misrepresented past, but it places this little known 18th century Italian migration into the wide context of the general cultural role of Italians in Europe. The Odessa Italian colony adds to the other Italian European cultural contributions.” European urbanism is described as “a universal cultural sign,” crossing traditional East/West borders through the notion and reconstruction of the transfer “of Italian cultural traditions, their art, music, sculpture, painting, architecture and civic governance, next to banking, supervision of customs and foreign trade.” And the review concludes: Historians of music and theatre will be interested in Odessa’s Italian operatic tradition, the legacy of Rossini and Cimarosa, performances by Tati and Brambilla, Fabbri and Guerini, Salvini and Duse, Ristori and Di Grasso and the lasting impact of Italian music on the cultural ethos of Odessa. The Italianness has forever shaped the Odesseans, imparting the aesthetic sensibility, the elegance, taste in music, attitude to life, their wit and specific speech.”<sup>33</sup>

Quite amazing, isn’t it? Odessa is an Italian city! Obviously this “Italianness” is a cultural invention, maybe even an attempt to construct Odessa as a Mediterranean and Western city and remove it from its Russian and Ukrainian context. But we do find interesting connections beyond such spatial fantasies. One very interesting Italian who came from Odessa is Leone Ginzburg. Born 1909 in Odessa, Ginzburg was an Italian editor, writer, journalist and teacher. He died 1944 in Rome, after having established himself as an important anti-fascist political activist and a hero of the resistance movement. He was married to the renowned author Natalia Ginzburg and is the father of the historian Carlo

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<http://www.mellenpress.com/mellenpress.cfm?bookid=6095&pc=9> for publisher’s information.

<sup>33</sup> Review by Michael Ukas, University of Toronto, quoted at <http://www.mellenpress.com/mellenpress.cfm?bookid=6095&pc=9> accessed 16/06/2010.

Ginzburg. Arrested by the Gestapo, Leone Ginzburg was tortured and killed during the German occupation of Italy.

And there are so many more we might find along our route, for example the Odessa Armenian Community – “The basic aim of the activity of the Odessa Armenian Community is to promote rightful national, cultural and religious interests of Armenians residing in Odessa. According to preliminary data, the Armenian Diaspora in Odessa currently numbers from 20 to 40 thousand”<sup>34</sup> or the German heritage in the villages surrounding Odessa, and in the beer-garden of the “Bavarski dom” of today.<sup>35</sup> As I said, this whole project is still a huge building site, and it will take more research, more participants, and more knowledge to complete it. For today, we have to hurry to meet Vladimir Jabotinsky once more.

“I’ll probably never get to see Odessa again. It’s a pity because I love the place. I was indifferent to Russia even in my youth: I recall that I always got pleasantly agitated when leaving for Europe and would return only reluctantly. But Odessa – that’s another matter: arriving at the Razdelnaya Station, I would always begin to be joyfully excited. If I arrived today, my hands would probably tremble. I’m not indifferent only to Russia; in general I’m not really ‘attached’ to any country; at one time I was in love with Rome, and it lasted a long time, but even that passed. Odessa’s a different matter: it hasn’t ever passed and it won’t. If it were possible, I’d like to arrive not at the Razdelnaya Station but on a steamship, in summer, of course, and early in the morning. I’d rise before dawn, while the lighthouse on Bolshoi Fontan was still shining, and I’d stand all alone on deck and look at the shore.”<sup>36</sup>

### *Diary 1993*

*Those who have written about Odessa in recent years have had one main theme: the emigration which is remorselessly killing the city. Life is abandoning it bit by bit. And today, too, emigration is still the dominant topic. All the people I meet have sisters in Israel, cousins in New York, aunts in Canada. Though they still live in Odessa, a part of them has already left. And anyone who thinks constantly – every day, Lena says – of what it would be like somewhere else, anyone who draws sustenance from the letters and parcels sent from that somewhere else, is already lost to his own city. Emigration has other consequences too. Those who move into the city,*

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<sup>34</sup> Odessa Armenian Community,

<http://www.odessaglobe.com/english/institutions/armenian-community.htm> accessed 24/06/10.

<sup>35</sup> Centre de management et d’entraînement ukrainien-bavière:

<http://www.ruslanguage.odessa.ua/fr/page2.htm> accessed 24/06/10.

<sup>36</sup> Jabotinsky, *The Five*, 197.

*filling the vacant spaces (and positions in the queue), come from the Ukrainian provinces. "They are concerned only with the next moment," Lena says, not with anything beyond that, and they certainly have no concern for the city. They are interested in Odessa because they may find a job there. But was it any different in the past? I ask her later. Yes, it was, Lena says: in the past people came in order to make their mark, to embark on new initiatives and to improve the functioning of the city, to place themselves at its disposal.*

The bus has lost most of its passengers. Have they all "failed the experiment?" Many images of Odessa are connected to people standing aboard boats and looking – as in Meir Shalev's *Russian Novel*<sup>37</sup> – either back or ahead, as if somehow our looking at things might still be able to affect what has already happened. Jabotinsky reminisces about Odessa, the Fontan, Langeron, Arkadija, the black column of Alexander II – "well, they've probably removed it by now, but I'm talking about old Odessa" –, the Quarantine Harbor, the piers, the "buildings high on the hill," the palaces, the grand staircase, the statue of Duke de Richelieu. In this way, he returns to the topic of the diversity of cultures and ethnicities within Odessa, "just remember how many different peoples had gathered here from all corners of Europe to build this one city." What then follows is something only someone from Odessa could have written:

"They say that people regard even the name Odessa as something of an amusing joke. To tell the truth, I'm not offended, it isn't really worth revealing one's own sorrows, but I don't take offense for a risible relationship to my homeland. Perhaps it really was an amusing city; perhaps it was so because it laughed so readily. Ten tribes converged, each and every one so fascinating, one more interesting than the next: it all began when these tribes started laughing at one another, then they learned to laugh at themselves, and then at everything on earth, even at what hurt and at what they loved. Gradually their customs rubbed up against each other and they ceased regarding their own sacred altars in such a serious manner; they gradually discovered a very important secret in this world: that what you hold sacred your neighbour thinks is rubbish, and that your neighbour isn't a thief or a vagrant; perhaps he's right, perhaps not, but it's not worth grieving over."<sup>38</sup>

All this has changed in the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Tanya Richardson sums it up: "The distinctiveness of Odessa – Ukraine's Black Sea port - vis à vis other cities in Ukraine and Russia is attributed to qualities

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<sup>37</sup> Meir Shalev, *The Blue Mountain* (hebr. "Roman Russi"), (New York: Harper Collins 1991).

<sup>38</sup> Jabotinsky, *The Five*, 108.

identifiable as ‘cosmopolitan’. Today residents and non-residents alike insist that Odessa is ‘international’, ‘multi-ethnic’, ‘Jewish’, ‘tolerant’ but ‘not Ukrainian’. Yet, the 19th century ‘cosmopolitan’ Odessa documented by historians was radically transformed by the cataclysms of 20th century history. The city lost half its population as a result of revolution and civil war. The establishment of the Soviet Union drastically curtailed Odessa’s economic importance and links with the world. World War II annihilated the Jewish population that remained in occupied Odessa while subsequent Soviet policies deported Germans and Tatars for collaboration with the Nazis. Meanwhile Stalin’s post-war campaign against cosmopolitanism targeted Jews and explicitly negated contact with, and orientation to, the outside world as a result of which Odessa’s cosmopolitan past was, at least officially, denigrated and repressed.”<sup>39</sup> The processes of “othering” began soon, and as in so many other parts of the Empire Jews were the ones to be isolated, outcast, at least as long as they tried to maintain their Jewishness or to give it a new form in the Zionist movement. In the end, these processes destroyed the precarious balance between the communities that had once made up Odessa and characterized “Odessity.” A very sad joke plays on this idea:

“A visitor to Odessa discovered that all the phone books were missing. He enquired at the Communist Party headquarters as to where they had gone.

The Party secretary told him ‘We discovered that they contained a list of all the Zionist spies in Odessa. Then, to disguise the fact, the Zionists had added the names of all the other people in Odessa.’”<sup>40</sup>

In the last decades “Odessity” has survived mostly outside of Odessa, in the Little Odessas of Tel-Aviv, New York City, Buenos Aires, or Berlin. In some ways, it has been depicted as a lost city, not so unlike New Orleans, a city of the American South with which Odessa has been compared in a recent study.<sup>41</sup> The very promising title of one of the contributions is “How Jewish was Odessa?”<sup>42</sup> It turns out that Brian Horowitz, in a useful effort to redirect the attention away from Zionism

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<sup>39</sup> Tanya Richardson, “Odessa’s Cosmopolitanisms and the Afterlives of Empire”, (EASA Panel, “The Loss of Cosmopolitanism”, September 18-21, 2006); see also her *Kaleidoscopic Odessa: History and Place in Contemporary Ukraine*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 2008), 215.

<sup>40</sup> For the Soviet era, see also Maurice Friedberg, *How Things were done in Odessa: Cultural and Intellectual Pursuits in a Soviet City*, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press 1991).

<sup>41</sup> *Place, Identity, and Urban Culture: Odesa and New Orleans*, eds. Samuel C. Ramer, Blair A. Rubie, (Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Occasional Paper # 301. Washington, D.C. 2008). The missing “s” in “Odesa” is a politically correct reference to the fact that the city today is part of Ukraine.

<sup>42</sup> Brian Horowitz, “How Jewish was Odessa?”, *Ibid.*, 9-18.

(on which much of the research about Odessa has been focused), tells the history of the Odessa branch of the Society for the Promotion of Enlightenment among the Jews of Russia. His work, which chronicles the successes of the “Society” during the reform period under Alexander II and its educative and philanthropic work, is very interesting, but obviously not an answer to the question. Maybe this question cannot be answered. Odessa might have been – or maybe even still is – “Jewish” insofar as the city reflected Jewish ambivalences (Jewish “phantasies”, Lena would say) about longing and belonging, home and exile, Israel and the Diaspora. For many decades, the idea of Odessa had been turned into a memory, a book, a poem, a song:

*Adesa Mame (Odessa Mama)*

*Ikh hob gehert fil lider zingen gute,  
men zingt zey ale mit groys interes.  
fun Slutzk, fun Belz, fun Zlutkiv un fun Lite,  
nor nisht gehert hob ikh fun mayn Ades.  
vi ken men gor fargesn aza shtot a sheyne,  
vu oyfgevakezn bin ikh, vu s'iz dort mayn heym.  
s'iz in der gantser velt Adesa do nor eyne,  
dermonen vel ikh aykh atzind in dem.*

*Akh Adesa, mayn Adesa tayer bistu mir,  
vu ikh gey un vu ikh shtey trakht ikh nor fun dir.  
dayne gasn, dayne masn vu ikh bin farbrakht,  
ikh benk nokh dir bay tog un oykh ba nakht.*<sup>43</sup>

Today, many things have changed again. Odessa is a Ukrainian city,<sup>44</sup> but a new consciousness of the city's past can be found among some of its inhabitants. There is a new Jewish museum (to which, among others, Lena Karakina and Anja Misjuk have contributed), international languages are being taught at the “Bavarski dom”, there is a Greek cultural club, and tourism has brought members of many and varied groups for visits to the city. Some of those who emigrated to Israel or Germany in the early 1990s are returning or at least commuting between places. So, where is Odessa? For many years, clubs and *landsmanshaftn* all over the world and in the virtual world of the Internet were the only places where “Odessity” could be remembered and celebrated. Today, the

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<sup>43</sup> [http://www.klesmer-musik.de/adesa\\_mame.htm](http://www.klesmer-musik.de/adesa_mame.htm)

<sup>44</sup> Cf. Patricia Herlihy, “How Ukrainian is Odessa?”, in *Place, Identity, and Urban Culture*, 19-26.



diversity, multi-culturalism and enterprising spirit which made Odessa an object of fame and of nostalgia can once again be found in the city that bears its name.

### Notes

For a musical illustration, see:

**Russian Music / Group: Rapka - Song: Odessiti**

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cL8cWlgCZI4>

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