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#### **Publication Date**

2007-07-01

University of California, Berkeley

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Memories of the Gilded Age in Russia's City of Sin**

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**Berkeley Program in Soviet and Post-Soviet Studies  
Working Paper Series**

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**The Many Ends of Old Odessa:  
Memories of the Gilded Age in  
Russia's City of Sin**

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*Summer 2007*

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*Abstract:* Old Odessa has been mythologized as Russia's gilded city of sin, a multi-ethnic southern seaport bustling with international trade, where exotic goods and people saturated its markets, taverns, and beaches, imbuing the landscape with glitter and color. The city developed an infamous reputation for its brothels, criminal dens, and dissolute inhabitants – a pleasure-drenched utopia of debauchery on the wild frontiers of the Black Sea. But old Odessa is considered “old” because old Odessa is over; its golden age of opulence, wily Jewish gangsters, and relentless revelry has passed into history, and this imagined past is nostalgically commemorated as a vanished paradise, a realm solely reachable in the present through legends, folk songs, and anecdotes. But when exactly did Odessa become “old?” An analysis of the Odessa myth from the early nineteenth century to the present demonstrates that Odessa's golden age has been mourned for its apparent passing from the city's very inception. Old Odessa's inaccessibility has always been an integral part of its allure, as it embodies an implausible oasis of abundance and hedonism amidst frigid, barren, and hungry Russia.

Gaily bedight,  
A gallant knight,  
In sunshine and in shadow,  
Had journeyed long,  
Singing a song,  
In search of Eldorado.

But he grew old  
This knight so bold  
And o'er his heart a shadow

Fell as he found  
No spot of ground  
That looked like Eldorado.

And, as his strength  
Failed him at length,  
He met a pilgrim shadow  
"Shadow," said he,  
"Where can it be  
This land of Eldorado?"

"Over the Mountains  
Of the Moon,  
Down the Valley of the Shadow,  
Ride, boldly ride,"  
The shade replied  
"If you seek for Eldorado!"

-Edgar Allan Poe

While growing up in Australia during the early twentieth century, Judah Waten was enchanted by his father's tales of old Odessa, the family's previous home, abandoned in 1911 as tsarist Russia became increasingly inhospitable for its Jewish population. According to Waten, his father boasted that

Odessans bubbled over with the joy of living despite the Tsar and his regime. In summer they ate luscious apricots and water melons and they loved egg plant, salty moist cheese, olives and fish. And they got sloshed on Bessarabian wine, the Odessa Jews being the only Jews in the world who drank heavily and liked getting drunk. He said he felt a pity for the austere Jews from Minsk because they only took sips of wine, and then only on the Sabbath and other Holy days. . . . He said Odessan women were dark, plump and lusty, the most ravishing in the world. And he boasted that Odessa turned out the most talented thieves in the world, certainly more ingenious, dexterous and brazen than the Warsaw ones.<sup>1</sup>

Yearning to see this magical land of his forefathers, Waten journeyed back to Odessa in the 1960s, but to his great disappointment the gilded city of rogues and merrymakers was nowhere to be found. "I kept staring at the passing faces," Waten maintains, yet "not even a descendant of Benia Krik and his colorful Jewish bandits" appeared before him. "This was not the Odessa of my father," he lamented, "the Black Sea Baghdad of the Odessan Thousand and One Nights."<sup>2</sup> Russia's Eldorado was apparently no more; but where it had gone remained a mystery.

Old Odessa, the celebrated city of sin on the shores of the Black Sea, is considered "old" because old Odessa is over; its golden age of opulence, wily gangsters, and relentless revelry has passed into history, and this imagined past is nostalgically commemorated as a vanished paradise, a realm that is solely reachable in the present through the legends, folk songs, and anecdotes collected and disseminated by writers, comedians, and musicians. Old Odessa's inaccessibility is part of its allure, as it embodies an implausible oasis of abundance and hedonism amidst frigid, barren, and hungry Russia.

But when did Odessa become "old" Odessa? How and why did old Odessa end? Judah Waten's allusion to Benia Krik – Isaac Babel's dashing, larger-than-life Jewish gangster who benevo-

lently ruled over his city of sin until the Bolsheviks decimated his army of bandits – suggests that old Odessa ended with the Russian Revolution and the imposition of Soviet power in Odessa in 1920, following a tumultuous period of anarchy and civil war. But the myth of old Odessa had been developing since the city’s founding in 1794, with the passing of its golden age being noted and mourned as early as the mid-nineteenth century. And ever since then, successive generations of mythmakers have posited their own endings for old Odessa.

\* \* \*

From its very inception, Odessa was mythologized as a city of gold, a multi-ethnic southern seaport bustling with international trade, where exotic goods and people saturated its markets, taverns, and beaches, imbuing the landscape with glitter and color. An expectation of easy wealth made Odessa a magnet for the thriving merchant, the destitute dreamer, and the indolent vagabond alike, a fact demonstrated by the city’s rapid and steady population growth during the nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup> Yet several travelers who visited Odessa before 1850 have maintained that Russia’s Eldorado was already in a state of decay. John Moore, a Briton who spent three months in Odessa during the summer of 1824, presented his travelogue as a testament to “the foundation, rise, progress, astonishing prosperity, and commercial decline, in the short space of thirty-five years of a noble city on the European coast of the Black Sea.”<sup>4</sup> The purported demise of old Odessa was similarly documented by Johan Kohl in 1844, but with much greater detail:

The years in which the trade of Odessa developed itself in the most rapid and brilliant manner, and on which the province as well as the inhabitants of the city look back as on a golden age, were, from causes to be sought in the position of Europe at that period, those from 1815 to 1820. The merchants tell with glee of the enormous prices the wheat rose to; the waggoners how they earned five or six rubles for going merely from the warehouse to the harbor; and the Ukraine nobles still glory in the magnificent balls they were able to give, at a time when they found their corn transformed so easily and rapidly into silver.<sup>5</sup>

Within a half-century of its birth, Odessa had been declared a city on the wane, and its inhabitants yearned for the bygone years of plenitude and commercial prosperity.

Subsequent memoirists and writers of fiction who equate old Odessa’s gilded age with abundance, luxury, and the absence of misery insist that the city’s miraculous success was rooted in its status as a free port, a status it maintained from 1817 to 1857. For such mythmakers, writing between 1860



and the 1917 Revolution, the end of old Odessa only began in the 1850s with the juridical abrogation of its free port, coupled with the significant political and economic changes that occurred during the reign of Alexander II. In a short story written in the early 1860s, the Russian Jewish writer and publisher Osip Rabinovich describes the free port era as a time when “everything was cheaper than now. Every newcomer sought to take something away from Odessa, because the city, jealously guarded by its customs houses, was replete with foreign products considered rare and valuable by outsiders.”<sup>6</sup> During its heyday, writes Aleksandr Deribas, the port was always bursting with “barrels of butter, wine, crates of textiles, bales of tobacco, fruits, pepper, and coffee.”<sup>7</sup> “Thanks to the porto-franco,” Deribas wistfully reminisces, “all of Odessa’s residents were rich.”<sup>8</sup> There was enough wealth to go around, and “one could live as comfortably as Europeans did.”<sup>9</sup>

Dorothy Atlas similarly maintains that Odessans regarded their city during the free port era “as a fabulous (*skazochnoe*) Eldorado, heaven on earth.”<sup>10</sup> But the emancipation of the serfs in 1861 led to a massive influx of impoverished peasants, attracted to “‘the golden city’ with its mythical wealth and lax way of life.”<sup>11</sup> A concurrent economic crisis further strained the city’s limited resources and tenuous social fabric, and Odessa, “which practically knew no destitution during its first fifty years of existence, was visibly engulfed by poverty, even in the city’s center.”<sup>12</sup> Atlas further contends that Odessa had a multitude of detractors within the tsarist government, officials who hated the city for its foreign character and permissive atmosphere, and, with the onset of Odessa’s economic decline, they launched an assault against the Imperial Court’s long-standing patronage of the city.<sup>13</sup> Degeneration had set in, and Odessa’s magical charm had vanished by the 1870s.

The end of Odessa’s golden age was equally perceptible by the changing character of its residents, including their exotic ethnic makeup and the care-free lifestyle for which the city was legendary. “Newcomers to Odessa,” wrote V. A. Iakovlev in 1894,

are no longer struck by its “tribal diversity” (*“raznoplemennost”*): the appearance and character of the ‘southern capital’s’ inhabitants are no different than in Russia’s other big cities. ... On the streets today one hears only Russian for the most part, infrequently interspersed with Jewish jargon, and even more rarely with Greek. To hear “The golden language of Italy” is uncommon today. The colorful street life (*pestraia ulichnaia zhizn’*) that amazed observers in Odessa’s bygone years has also receded into history.<sup>14</sup>

According to Aleksandr Deribas, “the toilers in Odessa’s port have become competitive and even

hostile to one another... and the joie de vivre that formerly reigned in Odessa has disappeared forever.”<sup>15</sup> Social antagonism swelled as time progressed, climaxing in the days after the 1905 Revolution.

Vladimir Jabotinsky describes how

in general, it became uncomfortable in Odessa. I had trouble recognizing our city, which only a short while ago had been so free and easy and good-natured. Now it was swept by malice that, they say, had previously never affected our mild southern metropolis, created over the course of centuries through the harmonious and loving efforts of four peaceful races. They’d always quarreled and cursed each other as rogues or idiots, and had sometimes even fought; but in all my memory there’d never been any authentic, ferocious hostility. Now all this has changed. The first sign of benevolence among men had disappeared – that is, the southern custom of considering the street as your home. Nowadays we walked the streets with caution, hurried along at night, and drew closer to the shadows.<sup>16</sup>

Harmony had formerly reigned on the city’s vibrant and multi-cultural streets, but this had given way to homogeneity, separation, and friction.

Odessa’s mythmakers posited that the city’s dazzling abundance and the pulsating activities of its people were inextricably linked to its geography, for Odessa was a southern seaside oasis with a balmy climate, pleasant beaches, and lush vegetation – an urban paradise where a booming economy coexisted with an idyllic landscape. Accordingly, the corrosion of Odessa’s glitter did not merely occur in the city’s socio-economic realm, but in its edenic surroundings as well. Deribas contends that he has

not forgotten the sun of old Odessa (*staroe odesskoe solntse*). It was brighter and its smile was more affectionate than it is today. It used to illuminate Odessa without restraint. Beneath its rays Odessa developed... and perhaps, because of this, Odessans were closer, and loved their city more than today.<sup>17</sup>

According to Deribas, “there was a time, when Odessans did not understand how one could live without the sea, how one could live without breathing its air; swimming, fishing, dreaming, sailing, there were no limitations.”<sup>18</sup> But now, he bemoans, “there is no longer a sea in Odessa,” just a crowded maritime highway sated with polluting steamships.<sup>19</sup> By 1917, squalor had apparently enveloped the city. Odessa used to be known as “the flower of the south, the pearl of the Black Sea,” wrote *Odesskaia pochta*’s Faust on the eve of the Bolshevik Revolution, but it has been transformed into “a garbage can.”<sup>20</sup>

But the myth of Odessa’s decline and fall should not be viewed as just one more variation on the classic story of the painful modernization of the city, the descent of the bucolic town into the bloated metropolis, as old Odessa was also infamous for its criminality, its legions of rogues who made the city

of gold into a city of sin. As a seaport, the smuggling of contraband was considered a cornerstone of the city's history, particularly during the free port era. Deribas insists that

Odessans concocted various clever means for transporting undeclared products in their carriages and wrapped around their bodies. The simplest method, however, was to throw their goods across the ditches [at the customs line], taking advantage of the guards' obliviousness. [The smugglers] were also well practiced in bribing officials.<sup>21</sup>

Odessa had been built over catacombs, a network of underground tunnels dating from Turkish times, which were used by smugglers, brigands, and thieves to transport their wares and conceal themselves from the authorities. Odessa's pre-Revolutionary mythmakers used the legends of the catacombs in depicting early Odessa as a city of bandits.<sup>22</sup> By the early twentieth century, the term "old Odessa" ("*staraia Odessa*") had become associated with criminality, but it was seen as something to celebrate as it gave the city its unique character.<sup>23</sup> And unlike the violent street crime associated with the modern industrial city, the subterranean bandits of Odessa's golden age were imagined as shrewd outlaws who were instrumental in supplying Russia's Eldorado with its profusion of exotic goods.

By the time the Bolsheviks seized power, the myth of old Odessa already existed as an elaborate body of legends and lore which commemorated the city as a magical land of abundance, a seaside paradise, and a wild frontier town filled with audacious criminals and frivolous entertainment. But the potency of the Odessa myth was rooted in its teleology; the city was fabled because it was no more and it could be no more. "Old Odessa" is over and "it's not coming back," wrote Aleksandr Deribas in 1913.<sup>24</sup> Deribas was not the first to voice this sentiment, and subsequent mythmakers fully concurred with him. But for the next generation of mythmakers who looked back from a post-Revolutionary vantage point, the golden age of old Odessa had in fact yet to end; Benia Krik had yet to be crowned the king of the Moldavanka. For the mythmakers of the Soviet era, Deribas was living within old Odessa; he was mourning the end of an era that had yet to reach its apogee.

\* \* \*

The Bolsheviks took power in Odessa in April 1920, after three years of unrelenting and violent clashes with a multitude of opponents – Whites, Anarchists, Austrian and French interventionists, Ukrainian nationalists, and, this being Odessa, hordes of gangsters who thrived on the social anarchy of

the Civil War era and, accordingly, had a vested interest in perpetuating the chaos. Debauchery, crime, and unbridled revelry flourished during these years, and, although Odessa was considered a city of sin long before the collapse of Imperial Russia, 1917 to 1920 subsequently came to be seen as the pinnacle of old Odessa – the last gasp of Babylon and its traditions of reckless abandonment before the encroachment of order and morality.<sup>25</sup> The more puritanical members of the Bolshevik government saw Russia's wicked Eldorado (and the culture that celebrated it) as the antithesis of a healthy proletarian culture, and they set out to obliterate it. "If you want to feel the soul of old Odessa, which is already dying," avowed the Tur Brothers in 1924, "then visit its old cafés and ancient cemeteries."<sup>26</sup> But the end of old Odessa also meant the eradication of its memory, as Mikhail Zhvanetskii suggests in the following dialogue:

-Excuse me, where can one find old Odessa?

-In the cemetery

-That's no true: the old cemetery no longer exists. On the site of the old graves stands a public garden with young trees who remain symbolically silent.<sup>27</sup>

As the material remnants of old Odessa vanished, Russia's Eldorado truly became a mythical city, perpetuated solely through the legends collected by its witnesses and those who yearned to have been among its witnesses.

Many Odessans, including Zhvanetskii, saw something special, something magical in old Odessa, and insisted that the city of sin was worthy of commemoration. But they did not disagree with their opponents in one important sense – old Odessa was over, and all that was left were the mythmakers who sought to preserve its memory in literature, film, and song. Writing in the late 1950s, Konstantin Paustovskii sentimentally described his final days in Civil War-era Odessa, where he "could not stop wishing that autumn would go on forever."<sup>28</sup> But the end of old Odessa was rapidly, almost inexorably, approaching:

Autumn in Odessa was luminous in the fullest sense of the word. A quiet, pinkish light filled the streets. It was pinkish partly because of the perpetual haze, and partly because the sun hung lower and lower above the horizon, and from early morning took on the reddish tints of sunset. But that year, the bright autumn weather soon gave way to fog. The light faded out. ... By the beginning of winter I was all alone on Black Sea Street. So long as the bright autumn weather held, the lodge [where I lived] was warm and almost cozy but when the heavy rains began it sucked up water like a sponge. Dark stains spread along the walls. The room smelt of lime and whitewash, and hordes of sickly, slow-moving spiders crept out of nowhere.<sup>29</sup>

Paustovskii decided it was time to leave Odessa for good, and he was not alone. Isaac Babel, *Il'ia Il'f*,

Evgenii Petrov, Lev Slavin, and Leonid Utesov all abandoned the fabled but dying city of their childhood by the early 1920s, leaving for Moscow, and thereby opting to honor old Odessa's golden age from afar.<sup>30</sup>

As many post-Revolutionary mythmakers considered the last years of tsarism, the Civil War era, and the early days of NEP as old Odessa's golden age, the city's notorious thieves and gangsters assumed center stage in the city's mythology. Odessa's criminals transcended the world of the mundane through their improbability: they were swashbuckling Jews, who were charming, dashing romantic, and operating according to a code of morality rooted in class consciousness and respect for their community. They were humorously mythologized as benevolent pleasure seekers who reciprocally brought pleasure to those around them. Isaac Babel's Benia Krik and his real-life counterpart Mishka Iaponchik (Moisei Vinnitskii) were Odessa's most renowned gangster heroes who gave Odessa its glitter, and their demise at the hands of the Bolsheviks was emblematic of old Odessa's end. "Mishka Iaponchik," writes Leonid Utesov, was "the king. And like every king – revolution brought about his downfall."<sup>31</sup> Abraham T'homi, a Zionist who lived in Odessa during the Revolution, describes how Iaponchik became a folk-hero immediately upon his death:

One day as I was walking in the street I heard a plaintive folk singer with an accordion. The doleful singing reminded me of the heart-rending songs about the exiles in Siberia that folk singers used to sing before the revolution. I stopped to listen.

The folk singer, an old man with a wizened face, was singing about a just man whose name was Mishenka (Mishka Iaponchik was affectionately known in Odessa as "Mishenka"). Mishenka, the old folk singer sang, robbed the rich and gave to the poor. He was a good man. But bitter was his end. Mishenka had "rolled" into the hands of the Cheka, and he "never came back."<sup>32</sup>

In Viktor Koval'chuk's imaginative depiction of Iaponchik's funeral, the Jewish outlaw was buried with all the pomp and splendor due to a king:

the celebrated cantor Pinia Min'kovskii from the choral synagogue and soloists from the opera theatre read the burial service of Commander (*Kompolk*) Vinnitskii. The king of the bandits is dead, but his legend lives on to this day.<sup>33</sup>

Benia Krik likewise perished in Babel's *Odessa Stories* and in the 1926 film which bore the gangster's name.<sup>34</sup> There was no room for Odessa's Jewish thugs and their flamboyant antics in an industrious proletarian state.

Old Odessa was thus imagined as a *judeo-kleptocracy* – a society ruled by Jewish gangsters –

during its golden era, but it was not depicted as a place of danger for its inhabitants. Everyone harmoniously partook in the city's bawdy entertainment and debauchery. It was a utopia of sin, where pimps, prostitutes, musicians, officials, and even the victims reveled together in the endless festivities, as one criminal folksong written during the 1970s recollects:

I loved to visit this bar in Odessa  
And fill my tumbler with wine  
All the criminal elements gathered here  
And we sang "*gop so smykom*" until dawn...  
We were outwardly delicate to the pigeons (*fraery*)  
And with the cops (*musory*) we drank muscat  
And even the judges and prosecutors did not disdain to eat with us<sup>35</sup>

But the party did not last; an honest and vigilant agent of the new regime infiltrated their criminal den, ending the irreverent festivities and sending them all off to hard labor in Siberia.<sup>36</sup> There are dozens of criminal folksongs that celebrate the chaos, crime, dissipation of old Odessa, and, as the Soviet era progressed, anonymous authors often wrote additional verses bewailing the demise of Odessa's culture of joyous transgression. In the famous song "A tavern opened on Deribasov Street" ("*Na Deribasovkoi otkrylasia pivnaia*"), where "the criminal gangs had gathered," brimming decadence gave way to a landscape of emptiness:

The tavern on Deribasov Street has closed  
Oh where are all the criminal gangs  
Oh where are your girlies, Marusia, Roza, and Raia  
And where is your leader Vasia-Shmaravoz<sup>37</sup>

Svetlana Donskaia, a post-Soviet poet from Odessa, similarly laments the Bolsheviks' annihilation of the blissfully wicked city, mourning the "extinguished spirit of criminal Odessa" ("*ugas dukh Odessy blatnoi*").

Spring arrived and the fragrance of the acacias filled the courtyards  
The Bolshevik night raids became ever more frequent  
They rounded up the gangsters  
  
The dandies (*franty*) and crooks left the world of the living  
And to their graves they took their groans of longing  
Their relatives were forever left with wounds in their hearts and a shadow in their eyes  
  
Odessa kept changing with each passing hour  
Like the sea before a morning storm  
The city marveled at the Cheka's godless misdeeds  
And the azure-blue light slipped away...

The city remained, but without its festive spirit  
And a deafening silence hangs in the air  
The ancestors' shadows roam in chasms  
And the city's ghost remains as a dream

The golden era will noiselessly pass  
And Odessa must live through its memory

And will keep trying to bring back  
What's most precious<sup>38</sup>

Destroying Odessa's criminality meant destroying its soul. The city's Sovietization entailed the end of old Odessa – the gangsters, the illicit abundance, and all the merriment which gave the city of sin its glitter.

Not all of old Odessa's iconic rogues and sinners violently perished in the fires of Bolshevism; some concurrently died natural deaths – aged, frail, ghostly vestiges of the golden pre-Revolutionary era. Such was the case with Sashka the Musician, the Jewish fiddler who played nightly in Gambrinus, a seedy tavern filled with sailors, thieves, and prostitutes made famous in a short story by Aleksandr Kuprin.<sup>39</sup> For Konstantin Paustovskii, Sashka's funeral was a monumental event, as it symbolized the end of old Odessa:

Odessa's parting gift to me was a show such as perhaps no other city could have put on. This was the funeral of "Sashka the Musician" whom Kuprin had described in his "Gambrinus." ... I was privileged. I was to see with my own eyes the true ending of "Gambrinus": the funeral of Sashka the Musician, life itself rounding off Kuprin's story. ... I was watching the crowd. All these people – fishermen, sailors, smugglers, stokers, dockers, navvies, a strong robustuous Odessa breed – had once been regulars at Gambrinus. What had become of them? "Life has been hard on us," elderly sailors humbly admitted. ... "Look at old Sashka in his coffin, shriveled as a monkey! Happiness is for the young."<sup>40</sup>

Sashka had died and Gambrinus was shut down by the proletarian state. Yet the memories persisted. "Gambrinus," wrote the Odessan humorist Karp Palubakov in 1967, "is the ancient dream of Odessans."<sup>41</sup> But the Revolution had terminated old Odessa along with the thieves and bawdy entertainers who had made the city Russia's gilded utopia of sin.

\* \* \*

The idea that old Odessa ended with the triumph of Bolshevism is a pervasive theme in the writings and music of Soviet-era mythmakers, such as Isaac Babel, Il'f and Petrov, Leonid Utesov, and Konstantin Paustovskii. They claimed to have witnessed the end of Russia's Eldorado and its passing

into history, and the popularity of their work has had a lasting impact on the city's collective memory of its golden age.<sup>42</sup> But old Odessa has always been a mythical city with multiple endings, and the next generation of mythmakers, who came of age during the Stalin and post-Stalin era once again shifted the temporal boundaries of the sinfully gilded city, convinced that they had in fact grown up amidst Odessa's fabled opulence and merrymaking. Old Odessa was over for them, but its decline and fall occurred in the last quarter of the twentieth century, engendered by migration, death, and cultural corrosion.

Such mythmakers have linked the end of old Odessa to the massive outflux of its Jewish population. For much of Odessa's history, Jews had made up a significant percentage of the city's inhabitants.<sup>43</sup> By the late nineteenth century, thirty three percent of the populace were Jewish, a share that was sustained until the Second World War, when the Nazi invasion and Holocaust significantly reduced their numbers. Nevertheless, over 106,000 Jews still lived in Odessa in 1959 – sixteen percent of the population, and it was only with the large-scale emigration of Soviet Jewry, which reached its apogee during Perestroika and the early 1990s, that Odessa lost its substantial Jewish presence.<sup>44</sup> With a few notable exceptions, most of Odessa's mythmakers and the legendary gangsters and musicians they have celebrated have either been Jewish or have been significantly influenced by Jewish culture.<sup>45</sup> For those who remained behind, the Jewish exodus signified the end of Odessa's festively unique character, and its transformation into just another ordinary city.

The dispersion of old Odessa and the ensuing lonesome isolation of its remnants have been recorded with melancholy and nostalgia by Odessa's mythmakers of the Perestroika and post-Soviet periods. Roman Kartsev bewails in his memoirs how

few of the Odessans with whom I grew up remain in Odessa today. Formerly, they had inhabited my city as the soul inhabits one's body. They have scattered, fragmenting Odessa into pieces, and these pieces are now making their mark on the streets of Israel, Australia, America, and Canada.<sup>46</sup>

The Odessan humorist Mikhail Zhvanetskii voices similarly despondent sentiments in a piece utterly devoid of humor:

I came back from a trip to Los Angeles. There Zhenia Prichman is writing marvelous songs about Odessa, the sea, the sun rise, the Peresyp region. He's writing such marvelous songs. Although, well, of course, it's obvious he hasn't been there for a long time. And in Odessa you sit and also think well of the inhabitants of Odessa, who are not there. That is, Odessa is there but its natives are here. While Odessa is there. They



somehow can't be brought together. And so, I've written about this isolation (*odinochestvo*). ... The tea kettle has boiled through, the gas has run out, the cats have run away. Everything. I wrote: total isolation.<sup>47</sup>

“Odessa has suffered in its ‘fight’ against emigration... and the fight continues,” insists Mikhail Poizner, poetically describing his search for his friends of yesteryear:

I climb up the olden steps and pay a visit by the Duke  
And once again I walk by Deribasov Street  
Once upon a time Raia, my faithful girlfriend lived here  
I look for her everywhere – but I cannot find her<sup>48</sup>

“I am shutting my phone book,” Poizner declares, “with all the numbers crossed out forever. How terrible.”<sup>49</sup>

The departing Odessans took the city's culture with them, leaving a ghost town in their wake. For Anatolii Gorbatiuk, old Odessa ended with the silencing of Odessa's vibrant music scene, the demise and disappearance of the jazz bands and orchestras that resounded in the city's restaurants and at weddings as late as the 1970s. But now, writes Gorbatiuk, “when I pass by ‘Zvezdochka’, I sadly lower my eyes: I no longer hear Shurik Fisher's fiddle, Iliusha Baier's bass-guitar, Valera Balaguta's Saxophone, and the silver voice of his wife Tamara.”<sup>50</sup> “Today,” Gorbatiuk insists, “it is altogether difficult to find a ‘living’ (*zhivoi*) orchestra in Odessa.”<sup>51</sup> Along with its wild music, Old Odessa was infamous for its unique lingo, saturated with criminal slang and Yiddish inflections. But Odessa's language has also vanished. For Roman Kartsev, “our Odessan intonation, ... this “amazing way of speaking (*izumitel'naia rech'*), this jolly language (*solnechnyi iazyk*), which was infused with humor in every sound, was so dear to my heart.”<sup>52</sup> “Where is that inimitable Odessan language?” asks Zhvanetskii, that potent and bubbly “champaign and pure alcohol mixed together,” which had always been “mocked by officials.”<sup>53</sup> Fulminating over Odessa's cultural corrosion, Zhvanetskii cannot understand how in an era “when all the peoples of the USSR are fighting for their culture's revival, we allow this unique culture of the Odessan people – the culture of the great Odessan nationality – to perish.”<sup>54</sup> But Zhvanetskii ironically answers his own question: “do not think that people have departed and Odessa remains behind. No – it is Odessa that has departed and dispersed, and it is we who remain behind.”<sup>55</sup> Trying to revive old Odessa is thus an exercise in futility, because, as Anatolii Kazak has succinctly put it, “Odessa no longer lives here” (“*Odessa zdes' bol'she ne zhivet*”).<sup>56</sup>

But Zhvanetskii's declaration that "Odessa" has left the Black Sea coast was nothing new, as for much of the twentieth century old Odessa's demise had been linked to the exodus of its people – its prominent mythmakers who celebrated the city and the rank-and-file pleasure-seeking citizenry who gave Eldorado its sinful glitter. The contemporary Odessan writer Valerii Smirnov sardonically points out that

if Odessa loves to brag about anybody, it is only those who have been chased away – by any possible means, and in any time period. Unfortunately, many talented but sluggish ones were not so lucky. They were fated to perish in their hometown, and, accordingly, the only people who remember them are their close relatives living far away abroad.<sup>57</sup>

Leonid Utesov was among the talented ones who were "chased away" by the greater opportunities of Moscow and Leningrad, where he made a career out of performing his Yiddish-inflected Odessan jazz music. He was seeking to recreate old Odessa on stage, much as Isaac Babel was concurrently doing in literature. But it was never quite the same as it had been during his youth in fabled Odessa, as Utesov found Moscow to be "too composed (*uravnoveshennoi*) and even flavorless (*presnyi*)."<sup>58</sup> Amongst Muscovites, Utesov came to realize "that I am an *odessit* . . . and that Odessa is a unique city."<sup>59</sup> "Odessa! My Odessa!" Utesov proclaimed in 1963, "I am returning to you, Mama, as a prodigal son."<sup>60</sup> Yet it was too late, as the gilded Odessa of his childhood had ceased to exist; Utesov spent the remainder of his life living in the Soviet capital.

And just as Utesov, Babel, Zhvanetskii, and numerous others have sought to symbolically recreate old Odessa in literature, comedy, and song, Odessa's émigrés have reputedly sought to recreate their gilded city in Israel, New York, and Los Angeles. In his short story, "Wedding in Brighton Beach," Emil' Dreitser describes how old Odessa has uprooted itself from the Black Sea and miraculously found a new home, thousands of miles away on the shores of the Atlantic:

They say that nothing surprises America. Brighton Beach is an exception. Brighton, a. k. a. Little Odessa is the fruit of an unprecedented transcontinental migration taking place right before our eyes, a huge city carrying itself here through the air, not a quantum of its soul lost. And what a city still – more like a legend in the making! Set out now from Moscow for the south, for the Black Sea, and climb a steppe hill, to view the gulf from its northern shoreline. You'll see that the town no longer exists, the town where, once, a sixty-year-old arrival from Murmansk would feel a sudden lifting of his spirit and an unexpected desire to live another forty years. The facades of the buildings designed by fugitive French architects on Deribas Street and Richelieu Boulevard and in the former Palais Royale still charm with their faded beauty, like aging Parisian

women. ... But the living city is no longer there. It's gone. It's clambered aboard TU-104 jets. ... This city gradually, grain by grain, settled in the southernmost protuberance of Brooklyn. Also near a huge watery hulk – only not just another sea, but a rank higher – the ocean.<sup>61</sup>

In the Odessan tradition of opulence, revelry, and dissipated excess, the wedding in Little Odessa goes a long way in reconstructing the festive atmosphere of Russia's former Eldorado. Like the Moldavankan gangsters who overindulged at the wedding of Benia Krik's sister Dvoira, the guests in Brighton Beach are treated to an endless flood of culinary delicacies, including "duck baked with apples," "baby potatoes with garlic and fresh dill swimming in little puddles of butter as sweet-smelling as alpine meadows," "a surge of earthly fruits, there for no other purpose than to offer you the endless energy of the sun," and "coarse paste of eggplant, seasoned with garlic and grated tomatoes."<sup>62</sup> Thus, Dreitser avows, "the ritual banquet of the human clan – which no one has the power to destroy – thunders on" in the new world much as it did in the old.<sup>63</sup> But this is not Benia Krik's Moldavanka: old Odessa is over, and, like all imagined utopias and vanished golden ages, it can never be fully realized in the imperfect present. The "New Jersey tomatoes," writes Dreitser, "despite their decent size and excellent flavor... [are] only a dim reminder of those the Black Sea immigrants are used to from childhood – Fontan tomatoes with an odor and taste (and this every Brightonite knows!) unequalled in the world or, it's suspected, in the next."<sup>64</sup> And although "the moistly sparkling Greek feta is an honest attempt to simulate the salty sheep's milk cheese of privoz, the famous Odessa market of bygone times,"<sup>65</sup> it is ultimately a simulation, a flawed recreation of an imagined flawless past. The spirit of old Odessa may live on, but its totality cannot be achieved, neither on decaying Deribasov Street nor in vigorous southern Brooklyn.

\* \* \*

Old Odessa is thus an inaccessible place – a memory for some and an unreachable dream destination for others. And for over two centuries many have sought to reach old Odessa, imagining it as their salvation. Among those who envisioned Odessa's opulence as magically transformative was Sholem Aleichem's fictional character Menakhem-Mendl, a hapless and impoverished pre-Revolutionary shtetl dweller featured in the 1925 Soviet film *Jewish Luck*. Mendl travels to Russia's Eldorado and ecstatically finds the opportunity to make the millions he craves, becoming a marriage broker in

partnership with the philanthropist Baron de Hirsch. Mendl is shown overseeing the shipment of brides, who – already in their wedding dresses – are being collected, loaded by forklift into containers, and sent off with smiles on their faces to their prospective husbands in America. Old Odessa is magic for Mendl, as he is a perpetual business failure in every other town and in every other profession. But Mendl’s utopia is pure fantasy: he had conjured up old Odessa in his dreams, having fallen asleep while traveling by train. Mendl never reaches old Odessa physically; his imaginary journey is the closest he gets, and he is presumably fated to live out his days as a destitute *luftmensch* in the shtetls of Imperial Russia.<sup>66</sup>

Menakhem-Mendl is not alone in his corporeal exclusion from the fabled city, and pre-Revolutionary Odessa was not the only era when seekers of Eldorado were prevented from crossing its frontier. The protagonist in Vladimir Vysotskii 1967 song, “Moscow-Odessa,” fails to reach the city by plane, apparently due to bad weather coupled with the incompetence of Soviet bureaucracy.

In Murmansk there is neither cloud nor storm  
And Ashkhabad is taking flights  
Kiev, Kharkov, and Kishinev are fine  
And so is L’vov, but that’s not where I’m going

I’m told that there’s little hope today  
The heavens aren’t going my way  
Odessa simply cannot be reached  
As it’s covered in snow and ice...

I need to go where there are massive snowdrifts  
Where tomorrow a blizzard is expected  
Elsewhere the skies may be clear and sunny  
And life may be grand – but that’s not where I’m going...

I need to go where there are snow squalls and fog  
Where tomorrow a blizzard is expected  
London, Deli, and Magadan are accepting flights  
It’s wide open everywhere, but that’s not where I’m going!<sup>67</sup>

This forlorn traveler cannot reach Odessa, but ironically it is not the fabled sun-drenched gilded city of former times. Perhaps he recognizes that old Odessa has ended, and all that is left are the relics of a frozen ghost town. Perhaps he needs to see the remnants of Russia’s Eldorado with his own eyes, yet even this mundane and depressing legacy remains outside his grasp.

Odessa, of course, is one of many imagined utopias whose inaccessibility places it outside of time and space. All cultures have their visions of paradise – the Garden of Eden, Eldorado, Arcadia,

Atlantis – places of magic and harmony that have purportedly been lost to the ages except through folklore and collective memory.<sup>68</sup> The fact that Odessa exists as a physical space in real time, need not preclude such an understanding of old Odessa’s symbolic essence. For much of its history California was imagined as “Eldorado,” “Atlantis,” “The Land of Milk and Honey,” and other such mythical dream destinations.<sup>69</sup> “Though the dream didn’t – couldn’t – literally come true,” writes Dora Beale Polk, “California remains symbolically an enchanted isle.”<sup>70</sup>

And Odessa, moreover, is not alone as a celebrated city of sin with an imagined and inaccessible golden age of opulence and dissipation. Other cities of sin, seaports that have historically been associated with criminality and abundance are commemorated with such nostalgia. Having grown up in Shanghai, the “Whore of Asia,” which was saturated with merchants, opium, prostitutes, and pleasure, Pan Lin recalls the fall of the city to Communism with longing and regret:

so far as all that was concerned, Shanghai was as dead as the moon; snuffed out were not just loucheness and debauchery, but also variety, color, glitter gaiety, temptation, the desires evoked in one sensuous display. Multifariousness was no more, so that instead of each person having a Shanghai of his own, made up of sub-worlds of this and that, there was now one Shanghai for everyone, monolithic.<sup>71</sup>

In similar terms, Carol Flake fears the probable demise of New Orleans, the Great Southern Babylon, “America’s most exotic city:” “that elusive, soulful essence that has survived for so long in New Orleans, thriving amid all the strangeness and decadence, is as rare and fragile as an endangered tropical plant, deep in the swamp, that may die before its curative powers are recognized.”<sup>72</sup> The city of sin is not necessarily the antithesis of the harmonious utopia. They are often inextricably linked by their abundance, mystery, glittering landscape, promises of pleasure, and, ultimately, their inaccessibility in real time.

\* \* \*

Old Odessa is an unreachable utopia, and, accordingly, Judah Waten could not have found the “Baghdad by the Black Sea” his father had described, neither in the 1960s, nor at any other time during the city’s short history. But to argue that old Odessa never existed is to miss the point. There certainly were millionaire merchants, Jewish gangsters, prodigious fiddlers who preferred the seedy taverns to the conservatory, and subterranean smugglers who operated in the catacombs at various times in Odessa’s

past, and perhaps they persist even today. But what makes old Odessa a mythical city, and, in many respects, unique among mythical cities, is *the way* it has been commemorated, celebrated, and (by its detractors), vilified. Old Odessa *is* the body of lore – the legends, the folksongs, the anecdotes – that has been collected, embellished, and passed down for two centuries, not the physical city itself. And implicit in this myth of old Odessa is the gilded city's inaccessibility. Perhaps unwittingly, Judah Waten has contributed to the preservation and perpetuation of old Odessa by recording his failed (and futile) quest to find and immerse himself physically in Russia's Eldorado, the fabled city of sin on the shores of the Black Sea.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Judah Waten, *From Odessa to Odessa: The Journey of an Australian Writer* (Melbourne, 1969), 6-7.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.

<sup>3</sup> On Odessa's history from its foundation until World War I, see Patricia Herlihy, *Odessa: A History, 1794-1914* (Cambridge, MA, 1986); Frederick, W. Skinner, "City Planning in Russia: The Development of Odessa, 1789-1892," Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation (Princeton University, 1973). See also Chapters 2 and 3 of my forthcoming Dissertation, "City of Gold, City of Sin: The Myth of Old Odessa in Russian, Jewish, and Soviet Culture," History Department, University of California, Berkeley.

<sup>4</sup> John Moore, *A Journey from London to Odessa with Notices of New Russia* (Paris, 1933), 127. Although Odessa was founded in 1794, the territory on which it was built had previously been occupied by the Tartar village Khadzhibei, which was stormed and captured by the Russian army in September 1789. On the history of Khadzhibei, see Skinner, "City Planning in Russia," 29-33; on the storming and capture of Khadzhibei, see Aleksandr Tret'iak, *Rozhdeniie goroda* (Odessa, 2004), 16-30

<sup>5</sup> J. G. Kohl, *Russia. St. Petersburg, Moscow, Kharkoff, Riga, Odessa, the German Provinces on the Baltic, the Steppes, the Crimea, and the Interior of the Empire* (London, 1844), 424.

<sup>6</sup> Osip Rabinovich, "Istoriia a tom, kak Reb Khaim-Shulim Feige puteshestvoval iz Kishineva v Odessu, i chto s nim sluchilos'," in *Liubopytnoe* (Odessa, 2000), 66.

<sup>7</sup> Aleksandr Deribas, *Staraiia Odessa: Zabytnye stranitsy, Istoricheskie ocherki i vospominaniia* (Kiev, 2004), 178.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 269.

<sup>10</sup> D. Atlas, *Staraiia Odessa, ee druz'ia i nedrugi* (Odessa, 1992), 106.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 128-130.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>14</sup> V. A. Iakovlev, "Koe chto ob inoplemennikakh v istorii g. Odessy," *Iz proshlago Odessy: sbornik statei*, edited by L. M. De-Ribas (Odessa, 1894), 373-374.

<sup>15</sup> Deribas, *Staraiia Odessa*, 180.

<sup>16</sup> Vladimir (Ze'ev) Jabotinsky, *The Five: A Novel of Jewish life in Turn-of-the-Century Odessa*, translated by Michael R. Katz (Ithaca, 2005), 138. The "four races" mentioned by Jabotinsky are the Russians, Jews, Italians, and Greeks, who (along with other ethnic groups) played a pivotal role in Odessa's development during the nineteenth century. See Patricia Herlihy, "The Ethnic Composition of the City of Odessa in the Nineteenth Century," *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 1 (1977).

<sup>17</sup> Deribas, *Staraiia Odessa*, 13.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 178.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>20</sup> *Odessaika Pochta*, August 22, 1917, p. 2.

<sup>21</sup> Deribas, *Staraiia Odessa*, 176.

<sup>22</sup> See, for instance, *Odessaika pochta*, July 23, 1913, p. 3.

<sup>23</sup> See, for instance, the serial story in *Odessaika Pochta*, called "Secrets of Old Odessa: a criminal novel from Odessa's past" ("*Tainy staroi Odessoi: ugovovnyi roman iz proshlago Odessa*"), which began appearing in May 1911 and was published daily for a number of weeks.

<sup>24</sup> Deribas, *Staraiia Odessa*, 8.

<sup>25</sup> See Chapters 3 and 4 of my forthcoming Dissertation, op. cit.

<sup>26</sup> Bratia Tur, "Odessa," in *Est' gorod u moria* (Odessa, 1990), 334.

<sup>27</sup> Mikhail Zhvanetskii, *Sobranie proizvedenii v cheterekh tomakh*, Vol. 2 (Moscow, 2001).

- <sup>28</sup> Konstantin Paustovskii, *The Story of a Life: Years of Hope*, translated by Manya Harari and Andre Thomson (New York, 1968), 178.
- <sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.
- <sup>30</sup> See Chapter 4 of my forthcoming Dissertation, op. cit.
- <sup>31</sup> Leonid Utesov, *Spasibo serdtse* (Moscow, 1999), 132.
- <sup>32</sup> Abraham T'homi, *Between Darkness & Dawn: A Saga of the Hehalutz* (New York, 1986), 83.
- <sup>33</sup> Viktor Koval'chuk, "Polk marshiroval v tsilindrakh, potomu chto Komandoval im Mishka Yaponchik," *Segodnia: Ezhednevnaia ukrainskaia gazeta* 8 June 2001 No. 877 Polosa 11.
- <sup>34</sup> *Benia Krik*, directed by Vladimir Vilner (1926).
- <sup>35</sup> Maikl and Lidiia, Dzhekobson, *Pesennyi fol'klor GULAGa kak istoricheskii istochnik (1940-1991)* (Moscow, 2001), 386-387.
- <sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>37</sup> Maikl and Lidiia Dzhekobson, *Pesennyi fol'klor GULAGa kak istoricheskii istochnik (1917-1939)* (Moscow, 1998), 195-196.
- <sup>38</sup> Svetlana Donskaia, *Sha! Slukhi khodiat za Odessu: Stikhotvoreniia*, third edition (Odessa, 2000), 16.
- <sup>39</sup> Alexander Kuprin, "Gambrinus," in *Gambrinus and Other Stories*, translated by Bernard Guilbert Guerney (New York, 1925). The Russian text can be found in Aleksandr Kuprin, *Sobranie sochinenii v devyati tomakh*, vol. 4 (Moscow, 1971). "Gambrinus" was written in 1906.
- <sup>40</sup> Paustovskii, *The Story of a Life: Years of Hope*, 183-186. Despite Paustovskii's claim to have witnessed Sashka's funeral, it is generally maintained by specialists on Odessa that Kuprin's character is based on a fiddler named Shendel' Pevzner, who lived until 1954. See Aleksandr Kamennyi, *Odessa – kto est' kto* (Odessa, 1999), 197. This is just one example of the many vignettes in Paustovskii's memoirs that may have been embellished, or even invented outright.
- <sup>41</sup> *Znamia kommunizma* (Odessa), February 19, 1967, p. 3.
- <sup>42</sup> See Chapters 5 and 6 of my forthcoming Dissertation, op. cit.
- <sup>43</sup> On the history of Odessa's Jews, see Igal Kotler, *Ocherki po istorii evreev Odessy* (Jerusalem, 1996); M. Polishchuk, *Evrei Odessy i Novorossii: sotsial'no-politicheskaia istoriia Evreev Odessy i drugikh gorodov Novorossii 1881-1904* (Moscow, 2002); Steven J Zipperstein, *The Jews of Odessa: A Cultural History, 1794-1881* (Stanford, 1985).
- <sup>44</sup> Mordechai Altshuler, *Soviet Jewry Since the Second World War: Population and Social Structure* (New York, 1987), 87. There are no reliable statistics on the ethnic makeup of Odessa's current population. Prominent members of Odessa's Jewish community claim that there are only 20,000 to 40,000 Jews left in Odessa today.
- <sup>45</sup> This is an important theme in my dissertation. See, in particular, Chapters 3 and 4, op. cit.
- <sup>46</sup> Roman Kartsev, *Maloi, sukhoi, i pisatel': Zapiski prestarelogo sorvantsa* (Moscow, 2001), 175.
- <sup>47</sup> Mikhail Zhvanetskii, *Rasskazy/Stories*, translated by Brian Baer, Irina Barskova (New York, 1994), 92-93.
- <sup>48</sup> Mikhail Poizner, *S Odessoj nado lichno govorit'...: iz podsmotrennogo i podslushannogo* (Odessa, 2005), 24.
- <sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 190.
- <sup>50</sup> Anatolii Gorbatiuk, *Ne ugasala muzyka v Odesse...: Vzgliad iz novogo tysiacheletia* (Odessa, 2004), 72.
- <sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 69-70.
- <sup>52</sup> Kartsev, *Maloi, sukhoi, i pisatel'*, 175.
- <sup>53</sup> Mikhail Zhvanetskii, *Moia Odessa* (Moscow, 1993), 148.
- <sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.



- <sup>55</sup> Ibid., 148.
- <sup>56</sup> Anatolii Kozak, *Odessa zdes' bol'she ne zhivet* (Samara, 1997).
- <sup>57</sup> Valerii Smirnov, *Legendy Odessy: Kartina*, 28.
- <sup>58</sup> Utesov, *Spasibo serdtse*, 113.
- <sup>59</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>60</sup> Utesov, *Moia Odessa*, 81.
- <sup>61</sup> Emil' Dreitser, "Wedding in Brighton Beach," in *The Supervisor of the Sea & Other Stories* (Riverside, CA), 92-93.
- <sup>62</sup> Ibid., 95-99.
- <sup>63</sup> Ibid., 105.
- <sup>64</sup> Ibid., 96.
- <sup>65</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>66</sup> *Jewish Luck*, directed by Aleksandr Granovskii (Waltham, MA), 1991. Two versions of the silent film were originally released in the Soviet Union: as *Evreiskoe schast'e* with Russian intertitles and as *Yidische glikn* with Yiddish intertitles. Isaac Babel wrote the intertitles for the Russian version.
- <sup>67</sup> Lyrics for "Moskva-Odessa" can be found at: <http://www.kulichki.com/vv/pesni/v-kotoryj-raz-lechu.html>
- <sup>68</sup> For a comparative examination of the paradise myth in different cultures, see Richard Heinberg, *Memories and Visions of Paradise: Exploring the Universal Myth of a Lost Golden Age* (Los Angeles, 1989).
- <sup>69</sup> Dora Beale Polk, *The Island of California: A History of the Myth* (Spokane, 1991), 13.
- <sup>70</sup> Ibid., 14.
- <sup>71</sup> Lynn Pan, "Wine, Women, and Song," in *Shanghai: Electric and Lurid City* Baker, edited by Barbara Baker (Oxford, 1998), 210.
- <sup>72</sup> Carol Flake, *New Orleans: Behind the Masks of America's Most Exotic City* (New York, 1994), 11.

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