

The London School of Economics and Political Science

**Negotiating Traditions: Transformations of Jewish
Identities and Community Building in Post-Soviet Odessa,
Ukraine**

Marina Sapritsky

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Declaration

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Abstract

Against the background of mass emigration, religious revival and social and political transformations in the former Soviet Union, specifically Ukraine, this thesis describes and analyses change and continuity in the Jewish way of life in contemporary Odessa. Odessan Jews – continuous residents and return migrants – engage in many different processes of identity formation and community building, negotiating Jewish traditions, values, practices and orientations. Through ethnographic analysis of individual and communal affairs, this thesis examines the everyday life of a post-Soviet ethnoreligious minority group open to competing cultural models, lifestyles and social norms that derive from different contexts: individual, family, community, city, state and transnational connections.

Part I “Jewish life in Odessa: Memory and Contested History” focuses on the city’s history and its legacy and myth as an open, cosmopolitan and Jewish city perceived as a “distinct place” within Russia, the Soviet Union and present-day Ukraine. These historical chapters not only provide the necessary background for understanding Odessa today but also challenge the highly negative and monolithic picture of Soviet Jewish experiences that often ignores the influences of specific urban cultures on the development of varying Jewish orientations. Part II “Jewish Revival: The View from Within and from Outside” concentrates on contemporary Odessa and focuses on the phenomena of local Jewish revival, mainly driven by international Jewish organizations and shaped by their differing agendas in the region. These chapters explore the various ways in which Odessan Jews selectively appropriate, explore and contest these new visions and practices of Jewish life that in effect offer an arena of novel orientations. At the same time, vital questions are posed about the overall goals and achievements of Jewish philanthropy projects in the former Soviet Union. Part III “Home in the Diaspora” deals with the processes of Jewish migration and analyses the various ways that continuous residents, visiting and returning Jews orient themselves to Odessa as a locale in relation to other destinations, including Israel, that partially define their sense of themselves as Odessan Jews. Chapter 7, in particular, poses the

question whether it is still meaningful to refer to Odessa as a Jewish city in the light of the changing demographics of its Jewish population and the altered status and orientation of the city's remaining Jews. In response, the thesis argues that Jewishness is envisioned as a metonym of cosmopolitan Odessa and that the fight for its recognition as a Jewish place is, by extension, a battle for the city's historically constituted – albeit diminished – cosmopolitanism.

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Note on Transliteration and Translation

For Hebrew and Yiddish terms I have followed the system of *The New Encyclopedia of Judaism* (1989). For Russian terms, and extended passages, all the translations are my own unless otherwise stated.

I have used the British Standard (BGN) system for transliterating Russian names of individuals and the names of streets and other city places. In the case of individual scholars published in English, I have reproduced their names in English exactly as they appear in these publications.

In the case of local informants, many of their names have been changed here in order to protect individuals' privacy. Where informants have also published under their own name and expressed the desire to use their real name, I have followed their wishes. For all others, alternative names have been substituted. American spelling, punctuation and date conventions (month/day/year) are used throughout this thesis and it broadly follows the guidelines of the American Anthropological Association Style Guide 2009 (www.aaanet.org/publications/style_guide.pdf).

Introduction

"In Odessa everyone is a little Jewish and a little of everything else."

Middle-aged Odessan native

Walking through Shevchenko Park one afternoon with my father, we came across a group of children from one of the Jewish kindergartens. We sat down for a rest and watched the children enjoying themselves outside the confines of the classroom. My father was astonished at the visibility of Jewishness in the former Soviet Union (FSU) today. "I know it's Odessa," he said, "but I can't believe that these Jewish children are openly walking around the park in *kippahs*."¹ Then one of the little boys came up to us, recognizing me from my previous visits. He said hello, asked how we were, and chattered on. At one point he asked if my father was Jewish. When I told him that he was, the child pointed to his head and said, "Well, why isn't he wearing a *kippah* then?"

Post-Soviet Odessa – for locals as much as visitors, for the young as well as the old – is a place where multiple orientations of Jewishness converge. This thesis attempts to portray and account for the array of new possibilities of Jewish expression to be found in the city today, and the responses they evoke.

Research Themes

This thesis explores the lived experiences and present-day orientations of Jewish residents of Odessa. It is as much a study of their shared efforts to construct, negotiate and question a meaningful sense of togetherness – otherwise known as "community" – as it is about the individual trajectories of Jewish Odessans challenged

¹ A round skullcap worn by observant Jewish men. See the Glossary in Appendix 2 for a full list of important Russian, Ukrainian, Yiddish and Hebrew terms and expressions used in this thesis.

to redefine their sense of being Jewish in a Post-Soviet environment. Exploring the transformations visible in contemporary Odessa, this work also looks into the multiple efforts, initiated locally and, increasingly, from abroad, to “restore” and stimulate Jewish life in a historically “Jewish” city from which most of its Jews have recently departed. I look at the actors and parties who represent these developments but, equally, also the divergent reactions that these new models of Jewish self and togetherness arouse among Odessans. In other words, I approach this setting as an emergent site of cultural contestation (Wanner 1998: xxv) and an arena of new orientations.

While this thesis is specifically about Odessa’s Jewry, it is also contextualized as one example of ex-Soviet ethnoreligious minorities. All share the problem that their historical representation is surrounded by a thick layer of overdetermining assumptions, manipulated truths or simplistic explanations of social realities, produced both by Soviet and by foreign media and scholarship. Such views have played a paramount role in the way that scholars and, more important, activists have approached Odessa’s Jewish past, present and future and the ways in which local Jewishness has become a project of revival.

Given the fact that, today, more of Odessa’s Jewish population reside abroad than in Odessa itself, this thesis also analyzes Odessa as a site of movement and migration and the associated networks of relationships, attachments, information, people and goods. The text here grapples with Odessa’s position as both home and diaspora, exemplifying the complex and at times contradictory stances its residents, ex-residents and returnees display toward the city and other destinations.

The city of Odessa is treated here as itself a meaningful platform upon which the history and present-day images and realities of Jewishness are built and rebuilt, and sometimes torn down. The city is the context for negotiation, representation and reproduction of what it means to be Jewish. The sense of attachment that many Odessans feel toward their place of residence includes the physical qualities of “their”

parts of the city as well as their own senses of its long history. The setting of a post-Soviet, culturally Russified and politically Ukrainian city exposed to the larger processes of sociopolitical transformation endemic to the FSU and, at the same time, embryonic trends of globalization, Odessa presents a unique context for studying the cultural, ethnic and religious orientations of its residents. The shift in the demographic makeup, as well as the representations of Odessa's Jewish traits and people, pose the question of whether it is still meaningful to refer to Odessa as a "Jewish" city and, if so, is there a singular list of qualities and practices at stake?

Odessa and the former Soviet Union

The changing contexts of former Soviet space have been the subject of much recent academic activity. Scholars from various disciplines have scrutinized the various projects of political independence and state building, economic reorientations and shifts in morality, religious affiliations and identity politics (see Kuzio 1998; Reid 1997[2000]); Wanner 1998, 2007a; Wilson 2002; Richardson 2008; Hann et al. 2002; Hann 2006; Humphrey and Mandel 2002; Ashwin 1999; Grant 1995; Burawoy and Verdery 1999; Berdahl et al. 2000; Yurchak 2006; Pelkmans 2006a, b; and many others). Some have chosen to focus on institutions, processes and spaces where these phenomena unfold and on policies that inhibit their development. Others orient their studies to specific "communities" of people rather than aggregate populations and attempt to study the individually lived experiences of social actors in order to account for processes of cultural change and continuity in a given locale. Studies of ex-Soviet Jewry are situated between these two approaches, as explored by sociologists, demographers, political scientists, historians and, more recently, anthropologists.

Given the ethnonational character of Jewish identification in the Soviet Union and the recently integrated religious element of Jewish orientation, studies of ex-Soviet Jews have to some extent been incorporated into the wider sphere of post-Socialist

research on ethnicity and religion – albeit with a striking disproportion, as most work on ethnicity and religion in the FSU focuses primarily on Christianity and Islam.² The minimal presence of Jewish-oriented academic literature on religious revivals can possibly be explained by the fact that Judaism remains the religion of a minority, by contrast to the dominant groups of followers of Russian Orthodoxy and Islam in the FSU – both of which are also characterized as “state religions” with strong elements of “national heritage” (Jessa 2006:169).³ Another reason is that most Jews in the FSU (and elsewhere) are not religious and tend to describe their Jewishness in cultural, ethnic or national terms. Thus, studies of Jews are not by any means restricted to studies of religion, although, as this thesis describes, religion has today become one of the important identifiers for post-Soviet Jewish citizens, especially for the younger generation.⁴ Another contributing factor is that many academics studying religious revivals in the environs of former Soviet states focus on missionary work and processes of conversion. However, active proselytizing and conversion of non-Jews has not for many hundreds of years been part of Jewish religious practice and this remains true today of Jewish revivalist movements. What is, on the other hand, very much occurring in the contemporary FSU are sustained and highly visible efforts to connect existing Jews to “their” old traditions and history, as carried out by visiting Jewish emissaries – and the paths of acceptance, questioning, negotiation and contemplation of these doctrines that follow. Minus the element of conversion, this phenomenon surely is comparable to the standing literature on religious revivals. Taking all these

² Hann’s latest edited collection (2006) is almost entirely focused on Christianity and Islam in Central Asia and East-Central Europe. Similarly, the recent edited volume by Steinberg and Wanner (2008) features only one chapter on Jewish practices. Also noteworthy is the fact that one of the most widely read journals dedicated to religious questions in Eastern Europe, *Religion State and Society*, is almost in its entirety dedicated to Christian movements (predominantly Russian Orthodoxy) and Islam. Not a single article in the last five years has focused on Judaism.

³ The Introduction to Steinberg and Wanner (2008) also notes that “nationalist movements in the various Soviet republics, and in Russia itself, articulated ethnonational identities of which religion was a component part and they allied with religious groups and institutions in pursuing independence from the USSR” (2008:2).

⁴ As a general note, Gitelman suggests that the difficulty of classifying Jews partially explains the diminishing interest in them in academic research, where a holy trinity of race, gender, and ethnicity has become so popular (2009:241).

factors together, Jews in the FSU have tended to fall at best into the peripheral vision of academic scholarship focused on post-Soviet ethnic and religious identity. More broadly, studies of ex-Soviet Jews, of which this thesis stands as an example, can tell us more about the ways in which individual actors transgress, combine or reject secular and religious practices and orientations in their everyday life and help us understand what role, if any, projects of development by Jewish foreign representatives and institutions play in the process. Above all, Jews, like other groups, are engaged in the process of creating new bonds of solidarity and structures of moral understanding (Steinberg and Wanner 2008:11) that evolve in the creation of new communities and translocal networks (some of which are directly or indirectly related to religious affiliations). These phenomena deserve the attention of researchers working in post-Soviet environments.

No longer bounded by the Soviet marker of nationality (ethnicity) previously inscribed in official documents⁵ and exposed to new components of Jewish identification, ex-Soviet Jews are presented with choices and exposed to pressures as to how, where, and whether to be Jewish. Contrary to previous material, which declared that in the USSR and its successor states “Jews” and “Russians” were mutually exclusive categories (Chervyakov et al. 1997:289), my work details how ethnic categories (also referred to in USSR official contexts as nationalities), in the context of a Ukrainian city with strong Russian roots, are in many ways porous, intermixed and strongly influenced by local city culture. Meanwhile contemporary circumstances described in this thesis also illustrate how ethnic and cultural categories (Russian, Ukrainian and Jewish) are simultaneously becoming more concrete and mutually exclusive.

⁵ In the Soviet Union the government classified Jews as a *natsional'nost'* (nationality or ethnic group), one of well over 100 such groups. After 1932 all urban residents had to carry an internal passport in which one's official *natsional'nost'* was recorded on the fifth line. Anyone who had two Jewish parents was classified as a Jew, irrespective of his or her subjective feelings of belonging, language, residence, religion or wishes. For members of mixed families, the choice of inscribed *natsional'nost'* remained open. Thus, as Gitelman explains, Jewish ethnicity in the USSR (especially since 1930s) was defined more by boundaries than by content (2009:243).

While remaining on the fringes of post-Soviet studies as such, Soviet and post-Soviet Jewish research has been incorporated into the larger realm of Jewish studies where it has recently emerged as a distinctive field in its own right (Golbert 2001a:1).⁶ Within this area, topics of emigration, resettlement, repression and, more recently, revival and Jewish identity are key themes.

Given the general emphasis on emigration in Soviet and post-Soviet Jewish studies, and previous restrictions on research in the USSR, a great deal of literature has been produced about ex-Soviet Jewish communities abroad: in the United States (Markowitz 1993; Gold 1997; Rittenband 1997; Hegner 2000 etc.), in Israel (Golden 2002; Markowitz 1997; Rapaport and Lomsky-Feder 2002; Fialkova and Yelenevskaya 2007; Remennick 2002 etc.), in Germany (Bodemann 2008; Bernstein 2005 (also for Israel); Baraulina 2005 etc.) and other destinations. Work on ex-Soviet Jews in countries of the FSU is still scarce and is highly dominated by survey method, archival and statistical data (see Brym and Ryvkina 1994; Ryvkina 2005; Brym 1997; Tolts 2007; DellaPergola 2007; Gitelman 1988, 2001[1988]; Chervyakov et al. 1997) which, unlike long-term fieldwork, are not able to reveal the intrinsic realities of quotidian life that are essential for understanding both the past and the present of Jewish locales. In addition, many of these studies are out of date.

Recent anthropological work has helped to offset this imbalance and expand the field of Soviet and FSU studies to include new themes. Sascha Goluboff's ethnography, *Jewish Russians: Upheavals in a Moscow Synagogue* (2003), not only contributes to studies of ethnicity but introduces the subject of race into the dialogue about Jewishness. Goluboff demonstrates how the construction and articulation of the Jewish group identities of Russian, Georgian and Mountain religious Jews in an Orthodox synagogue setting are first and foremost based on the quality of

⁶ Edited volumes on Soviet and ex-Soviet Jewry include: Ro'i (1995); Esptein, Ro'i and Ritterband (1997); Ro'i and Beker (1991); Gitelman, Glants and Goldman (2003); Gitelman and Ro'i (2007) (partially focused on Russian Jewishness); Ben-Rafael, Gorny and Ro'i (2003); Webber (1994a) (partially focused on Jewish communities in former Communist countries).

“difference,” in which race plays a crucial role.⁷ Based on her own observation and her informants’ accounts, she shows the context of larger power struggles framing the disputes between Jews from different backgrounds over who rightfully belongs in the synagogue and ultimately who is a “true” Jew and a Russian citizen (2003:3).

Alana Cooper’s (1998) study of Bukharan Jews, set in the context of contemporary Uzbekistan, similarly draws attention to multiple cases of fractured identities among ex-Soviet Jews in the light of their internalized Soviet ideals, acculturation to Russian culture and local practices native to the Bukharan community. Here too ex-Soviet Jews are challenged on their authenticity as “real” Jews. However, Cooper, unlike Goluboff, expands the picture of Jewish revival to include the role of foreign (US and Israeli) Jewish representatives, who contribute to the struggle for recognition faced by Jews in the FSU through the (in effect) new rules and organizational forces that they introduce. Cooper’s research findings parallel the ambiguous, contradictory and challenging process of identity formation experienced by Jewish Odessans, echoing many of the contestations that I found expressed by my informants. However, my work is not limited to documenting the problematic aspects of Jewish revival but also includes testimonies of those who welcomed new centers of Jewish life and new models of Jewishness, globally constituted and locally implemented throughout the city in official, semi-official and informal settings.

Rebecca Golbert’s doctoral research (2001a), situated among Jewish youth in Kiev, also emphasizes the role of national and transnational attachments that imbue the young generation of Jews with a new sense of identity. Golbert brilliantly shows the different sources of Jewish identification, defined by various actors in formal, informal, public and private settings, from which young Jews construct their multidimensional attachments to being Ukrainian, Jewish, ex-Soviet, Russian-speaking and transnational. In a later article she eloquently demonstrates how Kiev-based Ukrainian Jewish youth

⁷ Goluboff’s study of a Moscow synagogue with ethnically mixed Jewish congregants questions the commonly assumed affinity of Jews as “one people” and ethnicity as a thread of commonality.

engaged in Jewish activities in their city and exposed to migration trajectories of family and friends or their own trial migrations “locate their everyday experiences and relationships within transnational space” where they thereby “transnationalize the local and localize the transnational” (2001b:713).

The work of Goluboff, Cooper and Golbert are thus close initial points of reference for this thesis. Like Goluboff (2003), Cooper (1998) and Golbert (2001a, b), I examine the overlapping and intersecting realities of Soviet and post-Soviet Jewish affirmations, values, identifications and meanings that support individual and group claims to be Jewish. Similarly, my work addresses the power struggles involved in the recognition of one’s Jewishness as “authentic,” “real” or “true.” I have drawn on their arguments and evidence in focusing on the contributions of “stay back” (continuous residents), returning and “new” Jews of different religious and secular orientations who jointly contribute to identity politics on the ground. Like Cooper, I have paid special attention to the role of international emissaries.

There have been further developments. Goluboff’s most recent work (2008) in Azerbaijan, focused on mourning practices of Mountain Jews, has expanded the field of Soviet and post-Soviet Jewish studies in non-Russian spaces, which continue to be influenced by Russian and Soviet culture. Her work has greatly deepened our understanding of the interplay of Jewish, Christian and Muslim practices, the fragmentation of religious and secular conduct, the admixture of the local sociality of the Caucasus region and the imprint of Russian culture left from the hegemonic Soviet state – as these merge in the quotidian settings of a Mountain Jewish population. My own ethnographic study contributes here by also exploring Jewish life outside Russia – in Ukraine – where different religions, cultural dispositions and senses of history play a role in the sociality of Odessa’s families – many of whom are ethnically mixed. In the context of Odessa, however, Russian culture and language continues to play an important role for local Jewish residents.

My thesis incorporates many of the themes in the current literature (as discussed above) and at the same time it goes beyond the already documented segments of religious, elderly or young Jews by bringing together trajectories of diverse Jewish actors who align themselves differently along scales of religiosity and Jewish affiliation and represent members of three generations. Unlike the more formal setting of one specific Orthodox synagogue where Goluboff (2003) conducted her research, my work is similar to Golbert (2001a) in aiming to describe religious adherence also in private, unofficial and semi-official arenas where lines of inclusion and exclusion are less regulated but no less real. However, unlike Golbert's research on a specific age group, I focus on the multigenerational perspectives of Odessa's Jewish contingent.

Moreover, the ethnographies of both Goluboff (2003) and Golbert (2001a) are set in their respective country capitals (Moscow and Kiev), concentrate on the role of the state and describe a relatively high level of political and national sentiment in the construction and deconstruction of individual and communal identities. By contrast, my work examines the paramount role played by local city culture which, in the view of the city's Jewish residents and others, speaks of various dispositions and cultural traits as unique to Odessa as a specific place with a distinctive history (see also Richardson 2004, 2008). Making the case for a Ukrainian Jewish identity, Golbert's work thus, by comparison, falls short of recognizing the specific particularities of regional differences and distinct city settings where dominant categories such as Russian or Ukrainian appear to merge or, as in the case of my work, give way to one's status as an Odessan Jew or simply an *Odessit* (native of Odessa).

Odessa: My Research Site

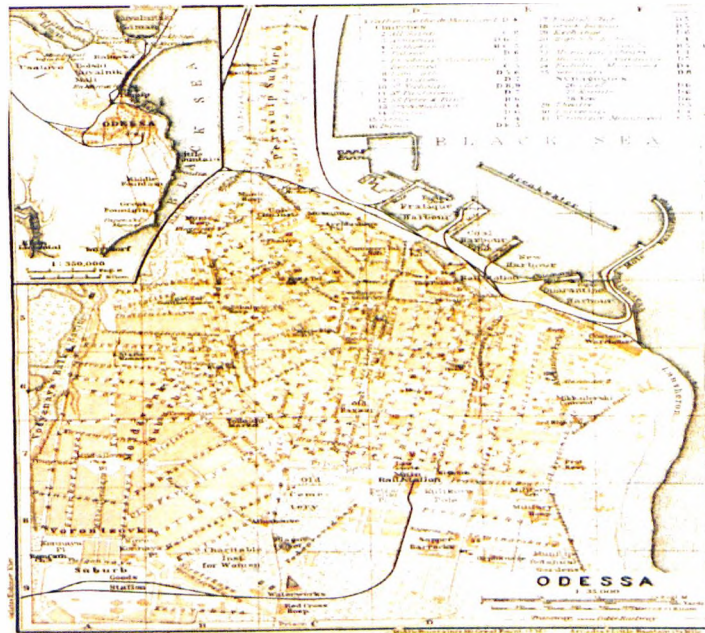
The city of Odessa, located in the southern part of Ukraine and sprawled along the coast of the Black Sea, is commonly recognized, by locals and others alike, as "unique," "special," and "different" compared with other Soviet, Russian or Ukrainian cities. In academic literature, it has been recognized as a "state within a state" (Herlihy (1986); Weinberg (1993)), while the "imagined community" (Anderson 1983) of Odessans

themselves is its own distinct *narod* (population). Odessans who have been described by others as a “breed apart” (Johnstone 2005:118), are known for their *joie de vivre*, sense of humor, southern temperament, resourcefulness, entrepreneurial spirit, their specific dialect of Russian and for being apolitical (Richardson 2004:3). These personal qualities are thought to be a product of growing up in the “cosmopolitan,” “tolerant” and “ethnically mixed” environs of the city, the surrounding warm climate of the region and the influence of the commercial activity related to the port.⁸ In her ethnography of Odessa, Richardson also notes that “while on the one hand mixing [of cultures] is stressed, on the other, the important role Jews played in the city and the strong influence of Yiddish culture on the development of what is felt to be distinctively Odessan is virtually always cited” (2004:3). Many locals also regard their city as “European” due to the influence of its foreign rulers and architecture, “Russian” by its direct link to its founder, Catherine the Great, and, among other things, “Jewish” due to the long presence and influence of Jewish culture in the city. The imprint of Odessa’s Jews on the city serves as a marker of pride for many. Jewish, locals and others, who admire the city’s history, joke about its Russo–Yiddish–Ukrainian tongue and praise the delicious Jewish Odessan cuisine. As one of my informants put it, “In Odessa everyone is a little Jewish and a little of everything else.” Despite recent efforts to stamp a Ukrainian national identity on the urban landscape of the city (Richardson 2004:3), the fact that Odessa is anything but a Ukrainian city is reiterated by many residents and visitors alike.⁹

Central Odessa is laid out in a grid system originally designed by the Dutch architect Franz De Volland in 1794. This layout makes it easy to follow the tree-lined streets of the city without getting lost.

⁸ For an analysis of port culture among Jews, see Cesarani (2002).

⁹ Richardson describes Odessans in 2001 energetically celebrating their city’s birthday (September 2nd), while August 24th, the 10th anniversary of Ukraine’s independence, “passed in Odessa with little fanfare and plenty of ironic commentary” (2008:3).



1 An early city plan of Odessa

(Iljine 2003:128)

Locals often enjoy evening strolls along some of Odessa's “signature” pedestrian streets such as the Primorsky Boulevard, which hugs the coast and offers a vantage point for observing the port. Many of the earliest buildings in the city can be found along this short stretch.



2 Statue of Duc de Richelieu on Primorsky Boulevard

It is also here that visitors pay tribute to two of the city's beloved figures, the Duc de Richelieu and Alexander Pushkin. The famous Potemkin Stairs that used to lead directly to the sea now connect Primorsky Boulevard to a newly built street and only indirectly to the port.



3 The Odessa Port

Minutes from Primorsky Boulevard stands one of Odessa's most cherished treasures – the Opera House, built originally in 1807. Its architectural presence has long figured in local Odessan boasts about their city's picturesque beauty and Europeanized glamour. Another central area of the city is Deribasovskaya Street.



4 Deribasovskaya Street

This part-pedestrianized street is lined with traditional cafés and contemporary stores, relics of Odessa's 1800s architecture standing next to newer constructions. The center of the city remains the most charming part of Odessa, with other areas and Soviet-built neighborhoods offering less allure.

Most of the streets have been renamed since 1991, returned to their pre-Revolutionary titles as part of the city's initiative to "remove the imprint of Soviet past from the cityscape and to inscribe a new understanding of history" (Richardson 2004:17). Even so, most residents continue to use old and new names interchangeably (Polese 2007). Street signs and most of the official inscriptions on the streets appear in two languages, Russian and Ukrainian. Highlighting Odessa's historical cosmopolitan character, Odessa has a French Boulevard, an Italian Street, a Jewish street, a Greek square etc., supporting the long-lived myth and former reality of Odessa as a multicultural "one of a kind place."

Ukrainian is the official language of the country but Russian continues to dominate in the speech of most Odessans on the street, at home and in work environments. There is increasing pressure from the government to use Ukrainian in education, politics and the media as well as to appoint Ukrainian-speaking personnel for chief positions within

these spheres. In many such contexts where Ukrainian serves as the official language, Russian is used unofficially and at times interchangeably.¹⁰ It is, for instance, not out of the ordinary to encounter a conversation that takes place in both languages, with questions posed in Ukrainian answered in Russian.¹¹

The total city population as of 2009 is estimated at 1,010,298. Out of the total number of inhabitants, 62 percent are identified as Ukrainian, 29 percent as Russian and 4 percent as members of other ethnic minorities (including Jews, Greeks, Poles, Bulgarians, Romanians, Tatars and others).¹² Emigration of Jews, ethnic Greeks, Germans and Armenians from Odessa, which started in the 1970s and had grown in force by the late 1980s and early 1990s, has been partially replenished by the immigration of other ethnic minorities including Chechens, Georgians, Chinese, Vietnamese, Turks and others.

According to statistics provided by the Museum of History of Odessa Jews, in 1959 Odessa had 106,700 Jewish residents, who made up 16 percent of the total population. By 1989, their numbers had decreased to 65,000, accounting for 6 percent

¹⁰ As Richardson explains, government legislation passed in 1992 "stipulated that in all schools the history of Ukraine be taught in Ukrainian" but, she points out, "[t]here was some variation in how this was actually practiced." As she explains, "[the] teacher would write their plans in Ukrainian for the district and city boards of education but did not always conduct their lessons in Ukrainian" (2008:227n5).

¹¹ According to statistics provided by the State Statistics Committee of Ukraine in 2001, 46.3 percent of the population of the Odessa region (2,456,000 people, of which the city of Odessa's population is nearly 1 million) declared Ukrainian as their mother tongue, while 41.9 percent declared Russian. Compare, however, the information provided in an all-Ukrainian census conducted by the same bureau in the same year, which states that 67.5 percent of the Ukrainian population declared Ukrainian as their mother tongue and 29.6 percent declared Russian. Among the country's Jewish residents, the figures also differ: 3.1 percent of Ukraine's Jews recognized "the tongue of their own nationality" (no specification is made whether the survey included Yiddish, Hebrew, or both, as a choice) as their mother tongue; 13.4 percent considered Ukrainian and 83 percent indicated Russian as their primary language of communication. Data available online: http://www.ukrcensus.gov.ua/eng/regions/reg_ukr; <http://www.ukrcensus.gov.ua/rus/results/general/language> (last accessed 10.30.2009).

¹² <http://www.misto.odessa.ua/index.php?u=gorod/stat> (last accessed 10.13.2009). Despite the abolition of passport nationality inscriptions, present-day census categories continue to categorize Jews as a separate "nationality" (ethnicity), using this category in surveys of populations throughout the country. Equally, as Richardson notes, "the legacy of Soviet policies lives on in the way that people in Odessa speak of having a 'nationality'" (2006:234) when referring to their Jewish, Russian or Ukrainian identification.

of the city's total inhabitants (a decrease of 41,700 over 30 years). Currently, according to the same source, the city's Jewish population is 30,000, representing a further decrease since 1989 of 35,000.

This figure of 30,000 contrasts sharply with the mere 12,380 Jews registered as such in the official Odessa city census in 2005.¹³ However, the official statistics are highly debated, as are the figures for Jews in the whole of Ukraine, where estimates vary from 250,000 to 500,000.¹⁴ As against the official city census, numerous local Jewish scholars and leaders of various communities told me that these figures are highly misleading, arguing that many Jews have chosen not to be officially registered as Jews any longer, whether through fear of possible persecution or because they regard Jewishness as one of their identifications but choose to mark their allegiance with their nation state or their language and thus register as Russian or Ukrainian.¹⁵ Odessa's Jews, like the majority of Jews in Ukraine, are classified as urban and, for most part, identify themselves culturally and linguistically as Russian (Gitelman 1988:441) even if they hold Ukrainian citizenship.¹⁶ Many of the same individuals also consider themselves as Ukrainian through family history or based on the fact that their city is located within Ukraine's state borders and they are (in practical terms) subject to

¹³ See <http://www.misto.odessa.ua/index.php?u=gorod/stat> (last accessed 10.13.2009).

¹⁴ According to the official site of one of Odessa's Orthodox communities, Tikva Or Sameach, the Jewish population of the city is estimated at 70,000 with a total Jewish population in Ukraine ranging from 300,000 to 500,000. <http://tikvaodessa.org/Page/Content.aspx?page=about/odessacomunity> (last accessed 10.13.2009). See <http://www.ujc.org/pages.aspx?id=38917> for a summary of the various estimates of Ukraine's Jews and the methodological factors affecting survey gathering and subsequent records of Jewish residents.

¹⁵ I myself met a number of Jews who, despite their self-identification as Jewish, felt it more "appropriate" to label themselves as Ukrainian or Russian in official documents. Since figures of those receiving Jewish aid from various Jewish centers are themselves higher than the official census data, and are closer to the figure of 30,000 most often recognized as correct by my informants, I leave this figure as it stands.

¹⁶ The main basis for acquiring citizenship in Ukraine following the collapse of the Soviet Union was the official registration of residency (*propiska*). Other proofs of residency were also used (such as testimony of witnesses, for example, asserting that the person permanently resided in Ukraine when the citizenship law came into force (November 1991) (personal communication with Oxana Shevel December 14, 2010). In other words, all those permanently residing on the territory of Ukraine following the break up of the Soviet Union (irrespective of their family roots) were extended Ukrainian citizenship. Thus Jews and others in Odessa are predominantly Ukrainian citizens.

Ukrainian legislation etc. Yet most Jews in Odessa today use Russian as their primary language of communication, even if many (especially the younger generation) now speak Ukrainian as well.¹⁷ Even before the efforts of the Soviet government to promote Russian as *the* language of the Soviet people (see Chapter 2), “the Russian language”, it was noted by one Odessa native interviewed by Richardson, was the “lingua franca in Odessa” and “everyone who came to the city learned to speak it” (Richardson 2008:200). This does not necessarily mean that my informants consider themselves as “Russian Jews” as opposed to “Ukrainian Jews”.¹⁸ The terms “Ukrainian” and “Russian” are used interchangeably and are often replaced with the title “Odessan”. Most are considered “middle-class,” although there is a significant number of underprivileged Jews as well as a thin layer of wealthy Jewish families, which, I was told, are mostly involved in banking, trade and business.

Since 1989 efforts to revive Jewish life in the city have involved the activities of local activists and an increasing number of international Jewish organizations that now dot the city’s landscape, including three synagogues, two of which – sponsored by different Orthodox congregations – Chabad Shomrei Shabbos and Tikva Or Sameach – occupy the original premises of Jewish religious institutions, while the third, Emanu-El – sponsored by the Reform Jewish movement – operates out of a rented basement space. These initiatives have also attracted a great number of foreign Jewish emissaries who have moved into the city. Public celebrations of Jewish holidays and public display of Jewish culture are among the reforms in the name of religious freedom that the state and local city authorities have been keen to support. That said, occasional episodes of anti-Jewish sentiment – at times including violence and

¹⁷ The popularity of the Russian language is also historically documented. Herlihy cites the “All-Russian” census of 1897, in which nearly 51 percent of Odessa’s the population declared Russian as their native language, 32.5 percent identified Yiddish as their native language and only 5.66 declared Ukrainian as their native language (1986:241-42). As the author points out, some of the Russian speakers were non-Russians who “ascribed to themselves membership in the political dominant group” (Herlihy 1986:248).

¹⁸ Comparing Odessa and Lviv, Polese and Wylegala note that “[a] Russian speaker might not be Russian, might not identify at all with Russia and still be accepted as Ukrainian (in the case of Odessa) or rejected (in the case of Lviv)” (2008:792).

hooliganism – nonetheless plague Odessa today.¹⁹ These incidents are rarely elaborated on by either Jewish or non-Jewish Odessans, as most local residents adamantly support the rhetoric of tolerance as one of the chief characteristics of the city.

Methodology

I arrived in Odessa in October 2005 and conducted fieldwork in the city until January 2007. I have since returned to the field on two occasions: once in September 2007 to attend a friend's wedding celebrations, and again in March 2008 to follow up on remaining research questions. At the outset of fieldwork, my aim was to research Jewish migration and its effects on the remaining Jewish population. I was, at that point, mainly interested in documenting the newly developed trend of return migration from Israel and other destinations of the Russian-speaking Jewish diaspora. Questions of homeland and belonging were central to my initial enquiry, as I hoped to understand how returnees related to their old/new environs in the light of their absence and the great sociopolitical transformations that had occurred in the region. I was aware of these processes taking shape in major economic centers such as Kiev and Moscow and I was curious to see how they were unfolding in smaller parts of the country that had different potential for returnees.

After a few months of living in Odessa, it became obvious to me that concentrating on returnees would entail seeking out individuals who did not organize themselves in any communal manner (as they did in Moscow and Kiev). Other obstacles were also at hand. Some returnees did not wish to share their stories with me due to their

¹⁹ In February 2007, 320 Odessan Jewish gravestones and one Holocaust memorial were vandalized and painted with swastikas and anti-Semitic slogans (<http://www.antisemitism.org.il/eng/search/?page=7&search=gravestones>). Many Jews and non-Jews regarded these tragic attacks as "out of the ordinary" for Odessa. Generally speaking, I found that painted swastikas were, unfortunately, not an unusual sight in the city. During my fieldwork, the Chabad synagogue was also vandalized when stones were thrown through one of its windows. In another instance, one of my religiously observant friends was attacked and beaten on the street. According to him, he was attacked for "looking Jewish".

undecided or at times illegal status, or their desire to return unnoticed by others. One explanation of this behavior could be an unwillingness to see their emigration from Odessa as a failure and to publicly admit to having made a wrong choice. A number of returnees were continuously on the move, engaged in constant travel between their multiple destinations, and thus making it difficult for myself as a researcher to detail their everyday life. I decided then to concentrate on Odessa itself and enquire into the different processes of transformation, including migration, religious and cultural Jewish revival, community building and Ukrainization that directly and indirectly affected the ordinary lives of local Jews (and others). While migration, and returnees specifically, still factor into this work, the latter do not figure prominently in the thesis.

At the outset of my research, I knew about Odessa's history and its once thriving local Jewish culture and I was curious to understand the present-day post-Soviet atmosphere of Jewish life in the city. I opened myself to learn all that I could in the time available about Odessa's elderly, the young and the middle-aged, the secular and the religious, the insiders and the outsiders, remaining Jews and returnees, the intelligentsia and working class, males and females, children of mixed families and purely Jewish families, affiliated and non-affiliated Jews – all those who jointly represent kaleidoscopic Odessa. Despite my efforts to see as much as I could of Jewish Odessa, I was, nonetheless, positioned to grasp certain phenomena better than others (Rosaldo 1989:19). With time, I developed a focus and began to examine the competing models of Jewish life that influenced the orientations of Jews, the internal and external factors that contributed to these new social compositions and divisions that flourished in Odessa's social and geographical locale.

I had never lived in Odessa or Ukraine prior to the outset of fieldwork, although I share much in common with my informants. Having been born and raised in Moscow, I am fluent in Russian and had a small taste of living in the Soviet Union until 1991, when my family left the country. I am Jewish and share some of the experiences of my informants of being brought up in a secular Jewish environment and hearing stories related by my family about the pre-Revolutionary life of their ancestors, their own

achieved status in the Soviet Union and faded memories of family gatherings that vaguely marked the Jewish calendar. Even so, the everyday reality of life in Moscow does differ from Odessa and larger events (including World War II (WWII)) played out rather differently in these two cities.

My own life trajectory included living and being educated in the United States from the age of ten. Despite my regular returns to Moscow since 1993, I cannot claim to have lived in the country for longer than a summer since childhood. In the view of my informants, the fact that I was educated in the West and currently living in London accounted for our many differences. And, of course, my time in Odessa was temporary and I, unlike many of my friends, could easily leave when I wanted to.

Like other Western researchers working in countries of the FSU, I was jokingly and not jokingly accused of being a spy. Moreover, the fact that I was conducting ethnographic research on the local Jewish population at times offended individuals who supposed that anthropologists were, as was common during Soviet rule, studying small isolated indigenous populations (or in other contexts, tribes). During such discussions, my informants "critically interrogated ethnographers" (Rosaldo 1989:21)²⁰ and I found myself a subject of analysis and critique. As a remedy for this awkwardness, I referred to myself as a sociologist. My affiliation with the sociology department of Odessa University, where I was supervised by Professor Gansova, also eased my discomfort and helped with my initial introductions.

Through the university, I met some of my first informants who were keen to tell me their stories and take me to meet their groups of friends and various Jewish organizations. Through one such introduction I met the students and teachers at Migdal,²¹ the local Jewish community center where I regularly attended lectures,

²⁰ Rosaldo emphasizes that social analysis must now grapple with the realization that its objects of analysis are also analyzing subjects who critically interrogate ethnographers-their writings, their ethnics and their politics (1989:21).

²¹ See Appendix 2 for a list of organizations and programs active in Odessa.

occasionally conducted interviews and, for six months, taught English to Jewish youth. During the same time, I agreed to jointly teach English to toddlers at the early child development center, Mazl Tov, a branch organization of Migdal that sponsored a "tolerant group" for non-Jewish families who, for a small fee,²² could attend classes at the center. Through my classes I engaged in conversation and interacted with students, parents and grandparents whose input was instrumental to my understanding of both Jewish and non-Jewish spheres of Odessa. During the last three months of my fieldwork I also attended weekly religious classes sponsored by Student Union of Torah for Russian speakers (STARS). Through a number of the university students, I in turn met Jews unaffiliated with communal structures of Jewish life and thus on the "border" of local Jewish activity. Most of my informants had some awareness of Jewish activities in the city even if they did not participate in the organized programs but I also met individuals who did not know and did not take part in any organized Jewish life (see Marina's story in Chapter 5). It is also important to note that some Jewish families (see Vika's story in Chapter 3) are not aware of their Jewish roots or place little or no emphasis on this detail of their history. It was more difficult for me to seek out such individuals mainly because they were not interested in discussing Jewish subjects and they were socially disconnected from the more aware and active Jews who made up the majority of my informants. The additional strain of working in an urban setting and "snowballing" through the university and other organizations made it more challenging for me to find Jews who did not involve themselves in anything particularly Jewish and who, for example, as was the case with Marina in Chapter 5, might reside on the outskirts of the city and thus far from Jewish activity.

More formal interactions with the city's academics, intellectuals and leaders of various Jewish organizations also gave me insight into present-day and historical issues of

²² For Jewish families, these classes were subsidized by the sponsors of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (Joint) and local donors.

Odessa's Jewish development and offered me a chance to present my material at a number of workshops and conferences, and thus benefit from important feedback. Thus, personal introductions via my informants proved to be the most efficient way for me to meet a diverse group of Odessa's Jewish residents of different classes, ages and orientations – most of whom, by virtue of this methodology, had *some* connection, however tangential, to organized Jewish life in the city.

My methods of gathering data varied and were heavily determined by the situations and informants at hand. Despite my residency in Ukraine, most of my data were collected in Russian, which served as the primary language of communication for nearly all the people I met. On a few occasions, my informants chose to speak to me in English in order to practice their language skills. I learned basic Ukrainian expressions but, only using it rarely, I did not manage to master the Ukrainian language. While in other parts of the country my lack of Ukrainian would have greatly hindered my ability to conduct research, in Odessa and among native Odessan Jews, the Russian language dominates as the primary language of oral and written communication in personal and most professional environments. I did not come across any Ukrainian-language social or cultural Jewish activity in Odessa. All of the Jewish programs I attended were conducted in Russian. A number of Jewish youth knew Ukrainian fluently, mostly as a result of their education in Ukrainian, the newly official language of instruction since the 1990's. Some members of their parents' and grandparents' generation also exhibited knowledge of Ukrainian yet others struggled with even the basic phrases they needed to deal with the state bureaucracy. Ukrainian was used in certain displays (see image 6) and on public Jewish memorials. A few of the elderly Jews I met knew basic Yiddish but no one I knew conversed in Yiddish freely. Hebrew was used as a language of communication among visiting Israeli Jews, in religious services and occasionally among returnees.

For most of the early phases of fieldwork I conducted informal or semi-formal interviews and tried to engage in ordinary discussions with those Odessans who kindly made time for me. A main part of my early research included observation, which

naturally turned into participation. Not always, not everywhere, and not with everyone was this task easy. For instance, Orthodox Jewish settings are designed to prevent female and male interaction during prayer and most rituals, when I could only engage with certain members of the congregation.²³

Maneuvering between the three congregations – the two Orthodox congregations and one Reform – as well as among other organizations was also not an easy task. Without my approval or, at times, without my knowledge, my informants made assumptions about my own belief system based on my choices of affiliations in Odessa. Thus some informants assumed my closeness to Israel, or to Judaism, based on my interaction with Israeli or religious congregations in the city. When possible, I tried to clarify my objective role in religious participation and institutional associations. Often, I had to make decisions as to where I would celebrate holidays, share in the welcoming of *Shabbat*²⁴ and participate in various programs, trips and camp activities. To some extent this did in turn have some effect on the social circles I was included in or excluded from and consequently what material I was able to gather. However, I was fortunate to build genial relationships in most of my disparate social circles, although naturally I felt more comfortable in some than in others.

I did not personally witness any burials in Odessa. I did visit the Jewish cemetery with a few of my informants to pay my respects to family graves and to hear stories of deceased relatives. I attended one wedding of a friend from Odessa that took place in the city of Dnepropetrovsk (see Chapter 4) and watched many videos and photographs of other weddings of my friends, which took place before my arrival. Of other life-cycle rituals, I attended one circumcision (*bris*), one redemption of the first-born son

²³ While Goluboff's (2003) synagogue study is predominantly based on male informants with whom she interacted within and outside the synagogue, I did not find such leniency among Odessa's Orthodox congregants. Possibly the timing of Goluboff's fieldwork (1995–96) and my own (2005–07) indicates that the possibility of such transgressions has altered. Goluboff's study documents some of the earliest phases of religious resurgence where mostly local (ex-Soviet Jews) were involved, whereas Odessa, ten years later, is more dominated by foreign leadership and tighter control.

²⁴ The seventh day of the week, the day of rest.

(*pidyon ha'ben*), an engagement ceremony (*erusin*) as well as numerous *Shabbat* services and celebrations honoring the major Jewish holidays. Outside these more ritualized settings, some informants were quick to invite me to their house, while others were more reserved, and still others never did. Where I was welcomed as a guest, intimate and informal kitchen conversations shared with families and individuals over a meal allowed for more in-depth and less censored discussions. Throughout my time in Odessa, I collected life histories of four families, three of which make up the body of Chapter 2. I met my informants both inside and outside their home settings as they generously shared their time, emotions, experiences and memories with me. In some cases I tape-recorded life histories, while other times I took notes and sometimes I simply listened, freeing my hands of any gadgets at all. I recorded those interviews that were arranged and conducted in a formal manner with leaders of various Jewish organizations. When it felt comfortable and possible, I took notes and often used my evenings to catch up on the material I could not otherwise jot down. I made short films and took many photographs, some of which are featured in this work and served as yet another useful method of capturing details of Odessan life. Because I lived on my own, I also freely welcomed guests to my apartment for meals and tea. With time, my relationships flourished into friendships: personal house invitations from friends, walks around the city and family celebrations became a meaningful part of my Odessa experience.

My informants were for most part educated and cultured individuals well versed in Russian and able to speak of and reflect on their experiences and history with a high level of analysis. I have tried not to speak for them (Clifford and Marcus 1986) but, rather, to allow their stories to dominate ethnographic passages, agreeing with Kotkin that "there is no substitute for letting people speak as much as possible in their own words" (1995:21). My efforts to organize this material and selectively include some details while leaving out others may inevitably exhibit the subjective nature of ethnographic writings, which, in the words of Clifford and Marcus, are "inherently partial, committed and incomplete" (1986:7). I am also aware of the fact that my

informants themselves have a “distinctive mix of insight and blindness” (Rosaldo 1989:19) due to their differences in age, gender, class, position in organized Jewish life etc. I have, when possible, tried to present each social actor within the context of their background and the setting of the interview or conversation in order to open these gaps to the reader rather than masking them.

I remain in contact with many of the people I write about here and feel myself connected to Odessa in many ways. As a result of my time in the city, I have learned that the hope of intimacy we as anthropologists expect to gain with our informants has to be reciprocal. Throughout fieldwork I also had to share details of my life and, at times unwillingly, expose myself to judgment, analysis and scrutiny. By means of such openness, I deepened my friendships and in turn my understanding of different aspects of an Odessan life, as Odessans in turn learned about me and the worlds I represented. I am greatly indebted to all of my friends and informants who made Odessa such an intimate and cherished place of my belonging. I can only hope that, in reading this material, they will feel that I have done justice to their personal trajectories and their city.

Chapter Outline

This thesis is divided into three parts. Part I “Jewish Life in Odessa: Memory and Contested History” consists of two chapters. Chapter 1 “Historical Background” lays out the background context, describing the Jewish presence in the Russian Empire and, subsequently, the Soviet Union, both in general terms and specifically in the city of Odessa. While this provides a general introduction to the city’s in many ways unique historic past, it is also a vital backcloth to appreciating the significance of contemporary developments oriented to the Jewish population of present-day Odessa, especially the multiple and often conflicted responses to international efforts to revive the Jewish life of the city. A key feature of this chapter is its critical analysis of the earlier literature on Soviet Jewry, which – as increasingly recognized in contemporary scholarship – was highly influenced by crude anti-Soviet stereotypes. By contrast, this

chapter highlights the diverse experiences, loyalties and orientations of Jewish Odessans and the complex trajectories of many of their lives.

The subject of contested history and memory is expanded in Chapter 2 “Remembering the Past / Making Sense of the Future: Narratives of Elderly Odessan Jews” through a detailed ethnographic account. Here, through the method of family histories, I examine how Odessa’s elderly Jews remember and reflect on their experiences throughout their lives and judge their present-day status as individuals, as family members, as professionals, as residents of Odessa and as members of its Jewish contingent. The chapter focuses on the stories of four individuals and their families that open the reader to some of the complexities, contradictions and contingencies that represent the world of elderly Jews currently living in Odessa or now testing their luck abroad.

Part II “Jewish Revival: The View from Within and Outside” addresses the processes of Jewish cultural and religious revival that have been part of Odessa’s milieu of reforms since the breakup of the Soviet Union. Chapter 3 “Places of Belonging in Today’s Jewish Odessa: New Laws, Organizations and Values” describes some of the new identifications of “being Jewish” that have entered into the rhetoric and representation of the local Jewish population through the work of foreign emissaries and international organizations. Describing these new voices of authority that have reshaped the contours and content of Jewish identification in Odessa, this chapter also explores how these new (to Odessa) ideological agendas are internalized, negotiated and contested by the city’s Jewish residents. Chapter 4 “From *Evrei* to *Iudei*: Turning or Returning to Faith?” deploys the concept of religious adherence to explore some of the ways in which local Jews identify with Judaism in their lifestyle and negotiate these new values and meanings with non-observant family and friends. Religious practice is often approached by Jewish leaders, religious scholars and some academics in the field as a return to previously abandoned practices but, as this chapter illustrates, most Jewish Odessans who welcome Judaism into their occasional or daily routine are exhibiting altogether new patterns of living imbued with *new* values. Chapter 5

"Missionizing Odessa: Jewish Culture and Revival on Display" details another phenomenon of contemporary Jewish Odessa that includes visits of foreign donors (visits known as "missions") designed to give sponsors a sense of their investments in building up of the city's Jewish life. This chapter, like the others, highlights the larger question of the relevance and feasibility of Jewish outreach projects and development and explores some of the ways the arrival of foreign missions, intended to unite Jews from around the world, actually creates a chasm between the givers and takers of Jewish philanthropy.

Part III "Home in the Diaspora" examines how Odessa, throughout its history, has been shaped and reshaped by processes of migration that have successively altered the Jewishness of the city. Chapter 6 "Migration and Life Abroad: Perspectives on Israel and Other Destinations" reveals present-day attitudes and practices that Jews of Odessa exhibit in relation to emigration and re-migration, and the destinations these movements involve. By concentrating on those who have remained, those who are leaving, and those who have recently returned from Israel, I engage with the muddled question of home and diaspora and examine the relationships that my informants hold to Odessa, Israel and other possible places of belonging. In this chapter, I argue that the centrality of Israel as "homeland" is challenged by the attachments that local Jews feel toward their life in Odessa and other places where family and friends might reside. This chapter demonstrates how home and diaspora are not fixed or absolute givens for the diverse Jewish population of Odessa.

The image of Odessa as a "Jewish city" and a home to Jewish humor, cuisine, language and aura is the central theme of Chapter 7 "Odessa: A Jewish city?." By examining the intertwined discourses of myth, history and individual realities that support and simultaneously challenge Odessa's trope of Jewishness, this chapter demonstrates how locals deploy the stereotype of their city as a "Jewish city" in a number of interconnecting ways: as a claim to partial ownership of cultural traits, as a strategy of empowerment, as a way to maintain long-distance ties and as a tactic of resistance against the forces of Ukrainian homogenization. I argue that, in post-Soviet Odessa,

Jews, among other minority groups, are facing a challenge in redefining themselves in their new environs. In these circumstances, the myth and reality of the city's Jewishness, Greekness, Russianness etc. serves as a means to valorize and protect Odessa's distinctiveness as a non-Ukrainian city.

PART I

Jewish Life in Odessa: Memory and Contested History

Chapter 1

Historical Background

Introduction

Jewish history during the time of the Russian Empire and the subsequent Soviet state is a highly contested topic. First, there is the general issue of the selectivity of the researchers themselves, framing a diverse range of experiences within their own priorities and narrative strategies (Zipperstein 1999:68). Second, there is the problem of censorship and highly restricted access to archival sources for Western historians and local researchers during much of Soviet rule. These difficulties account for a body of historical writings often based on a narrow range of available materials: newspapers, journals, memoirs and travelers' accounts that, especially when taken out of context, led to skewed accounts of history primarily focused on stories of the elites or subject to vicissitudes of memory and the sway of nostalgia (see Herlihy 1986: viii; Zipperstein 1999:69; Zipperstein 1986:2; Orbach 1980; Veidlinger 2009: xiii).

Early Russian Jewish historiography was mainly spearheaded by an Odessan native, Simon Dubnow and Iulii Gessen, whose take on Russia's Jewish history still overshadows subsequent studies of Jews in the Pale of Settlement.²⁵ The works of these historians, concentrating on the repressive regime of the Tsars, captured Jewish life in pre-Revolutionary Russia and evoked feelings of persecution and injustice. It is due to such studies, as Benjamin Nathans points out, that the majority of Western audiences are accustomed to thinking of Jews in Imperial Russia as "the least integrated of all the European Jewish communities, as quintessential outsiders and scapegoats for a regime that eventually collapsed in 1917 under the weight of its own backwardness" (2002:1). This overly simplified and negative image of the Pale is also

²⁵ An area designated for Jewish residence in the Russian Empire.

reinforced by literary works on Jewish life depicting impoverished Jews fleeing Russian pogroms at the turn of the century (Zipperstein 1999:22). Following this widespread interpretation, the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution and the early policies of the Soviet government are portrayed as a liberating and modernizing force for Russia's Jewish contingent, who suddenly appeared as "consummate insiders in the young Soviet state" (Nathans 2002:2).

At the same time, there is a completely different picture in which the implementation of the Pale under the Tsars is seen as, in some ways, a positive development for Russia's Jewry: its segregation – guaranteed by an invisible border – allowed Jews to preserve many of their rites, rituals and traditions. Analyzing the relationship of memory and history among Russian Jews, Zipperstein's book, *Imagining Russian Jewry*, demonstrates how, for American Jewry contemplating their identity after WWII, their Russian Jewish past emerged as a token that Jews in the Pale had previously personified "spirituality, wholeness, and communal cohesion" (1999:19). Even recognizing that the Russian *shtetl* (small rural town or village) was actually a violent and unpredictable place, for many Jews, as Zipperstein points out, it was also "the scene of a common childhood when faith was steady, families were whole, and God favored his people" (Zipperstein 1999:20).²⁶ Zipperstein brilliantly analyzes examples of American writings in which *shtetl* Jews are portrayed praising their old values and shunning the values of their new world. In this version of popular and written history, it is not Tsarism that is the target. Rather, the Soviet government (under the slogan of liberation) and the later events of WWII were responsible for destroying most of the core Jewish social and religious institutions, never to be re-created. Despite their opposing interpretations of pre-Soviet and Soviet government, both camps of writers

²⁶ Writing against the "idealized *shtetl*," Veidlinger argues that, contrary to the static, ahistorical image of the *shtetl* portrayed in popular culture – in the old-worldness of Broadway's Tevye (*Fiddler on the Roof*), Marc Chagall's paintings or the anthropological study by Zborowski and Herzog – the *shtetl* does not represent a Jewish traditional way of life somehow hermetically sealed off from the impact of modernity (2009:11).

would hardly disagree on the fact that the years of Soviet rule (1917–91) dramatically transformed Jewish life in that part of the world.

Yet, Soviet Jewish history is as much contested as its predecessor. Jews during Soviet rule are often depicted as victims of an oppressive anti-Semitic and occasionally brutal regime that banned religious observance and did away with the already dying remains of other traditional Jewish practices and education. For many writers of this school, Jewish identity under the Soviets had purely negative associations. In other words, Jews in the Soviet Union knew that they were Jewish only because of the personal and state discrimination that they faced on a daily basis. As Gitelman describes:

Some children learned early on that they were quite different from all the rest, and that that difference was not in their favor. For others the awakening came later – when denied entrance to a university for which they qualified, or for a job for which they had all the credentials, or a promotion, or a trip abroad. (2001[1988]:178)

These perceptions are strongly supported by interviews and memoirs of Jewish activists, dissidents and *refuseniks*²⁷ – but are highly questioned by ordinary Jews. Markowitz (1993) offers a critical assessment of Western scholarship's depiction of Soviet Jewry, targeting authors such as Baron (1987[1964]), Smolar (1971) and Wiesel (1966) for claiming that Jews became “nothing more than a juridically defined minority group with no opportunities for cultural or religious expression” (1993:43). In this dominant Western perception, Jews were engaged in a heroic battle against the Soviet system or risking everything in order to emigrate (1993:43). However, as this thesis and other anthropological accounts demonstrate, many Jews were striving for assimilation on their own initiative and, when they left their country, did so for a variety of complicated and personal reasons, mostly to do with the instability following the breakup of the Soviet Union:

The majority of the people – at least those whom I interviewed during the mid- and late 1980s in New York, Israel, and Chicago denied being

²⁷ Persons refused exit visas during Soviet rule.

modern day Jewish heroes and stressed instead that they had really been striving for assimilation in the USSR and ultimately left when they – or their children – encountered insurmountable obstacles. (Markowitz 1995:203)

Recent works by Slezkine (2004), Yurchak (2006) and others, including Kotkin (1995), Humphrey (2004) and Steinberg and Wanner (2008) allow us to review Soviet history from yet another perspective. Slezkine's book, *The Jewish Century* (2004), argues that Soviet Jews had managed to establish themselves as one of the most successful ethnic minorities in the USSR due to their historically constituted ability to survive and live as strangers. Thus, many members of the Jewish population chose to be aligned with the socialist movement, while many of the same individuals made up the country's intelligentsia. In his analysis of Stalinism, Kotkin, in similar vein, notes how people in the Soviet Union participated in the building of socialism for a variety of reasons but, as he emphasizes, "participate they did" (1995:154). In Slezkine's explanation, the Soviet Union offered its Jews a chance to modernize and mobilize as a collective by joining the revolutionary Soviet cause. This was part of a process of consciously abandoning their *shtetl* ways and becoming a highly educated, Russian-speaking and predominantly urban minority. Emphasizing the impressive social and economic position Jews had occupied in the later years of Tsarist rule and under Soviet leadership, Slezkine's contribution demonstrates some of the positive attributes of Jewish life overlooked or avoided by numerous other historians.

Yurchak, writing about the larger Soviet population, also cautions his readers against the overwhelmingly negative connotations of Soviet rule often presented in literary accounts of Soviet reality. He urges his audience to look beyond the popular dichotomy between a negative and "immoral" Soviet life and the positive coming of *perestroika* and then the collapse of the USSR. Yurchak himself tries to combat this "binary socialism": his book *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More* makes an effort to "contemplate and rehumanize [the picture of] Soviet socialist life" (2006:10):

What tends to get lost in the binary accounts is the crucial and seemingly paradoxical fact that, for a great number of Soviet citizens, many of the fundamental values, ideals, and realities of socialist life

(such as equality, community, selflessness, altruism, friendship, ethical relations, safety, education, work, creativity, and concern for the future) were of genuine importance, despite the fact that many of their everyday practices routinely transgressed, reinterpreted, or refused certain norms and rules represented in the official ideology of the socialist state. (2006:8)

Thus Yurchak seeks to depict the everyday reality of individuals, who portray their experiences of living in the USSR in different ways. The reader, for example, meets a Russian philosopher who, in the first years of post-Soviet rule, had come to recognize that the grayness and fear that characterized Soviet reality had at the same time been inseparably linked with a very real optimism and warmth, with accompanying forms of "human happiness," "comforts and well-being," and "cordiality, successes and order" in a "well-furnished common space of living" (2006:8). Describing the years of Stalin's rule in the urban setting of Magnitogorsk, Kotkin also notes that Stalinism "was not just a political system ... It was a set of values, a social identity, a way of life" that gave a sense of moral superiority to other great powers of the world (1995:12, 23).

Similarly, Steinberg and Wanner (2008) emphasize how Soviet socialism, however coercive it often was, nonetheless "provided a type of moral community, a sense of integration, order, and shared values" to its people (2008:3). Indeed, while this would come as a surprise to those conditioned by the stereotypical view, many ex-Soviet citizens mourn the loss of togetherness and "seek to recover, rebuild, or invent new communities, however divergent their visions" (2008:3). Humphrey also comments that the Soviet collective was a "moral universe of comradeship" (2004:146). As she explains, there were many social spheres where real warmth flourished:

After the parades, people partied all night, usually in a total multi-ethnic ambience. Audiences enjoyed the cultural achievements of other nationalities. People took pleasure in luxuries from all over the union (Georgian wines, Siberian furs, Russian lacquer etc) and regarded them as common achievements of the Soviet people. Of course in everyday life, a great deal of comradeship also rested on a sense of shared hardship, common fears, and on the grey sameness of material life. But the socialist values of responsibility and duty towards others were real too. (2004:146)

Taking up the approach of these writers, I am interested in uncovering the multilayered experiences of Odessan Jewry who, despite the obvious choice of emigration, continued to reside in their city, those who have recently returned following unmet dreams of emigration or for prospects of a better life, and those who still contemplate life abroad. This chapter and the thesis as a whole represent an enquiry into the minutiae of Odessa's urban life as I attempt to make sense of certain ways of thinking and social practices of Jewish Odessans who exhibit different loyalties to the Soviet regime and express differing commitments to socialist values and life.

In my view, generalized historical accounts of Russian Jews, or Ukrainian Jews for that matter, are suspect in their assumptions of homogeneity. Rather, one needs to be sensitive to the divergent life circumstances of different Jewish populations and also the differences – whether of language, residence or state legislation – within those populations that make up the larger group identities of “Russian,” “Ukrainian” or “Soviet” and “ex-Soviet” Jewry. Through listening to the voices of ex-Soviet Jews and, following the inspiration of the more recent historical works discussed above, it becomes possible to analyze lives of Jews and others under Soviet socialism whose trajectories may well have included tremendous suffering, repression, fear, and censorship – alongside strong moral values, a sense of accomplishment, genuineness in social relations and other positive attributes of an internalized Soviet ideology. As Nathans said of the category of “crisis,” equally one should be skeptical of all “ready-made dramatic structure[s] and the alarming frequency with which they are still invoked” in historical accounts of Russian and Eastern European Jewry (2002:9).

I start this chapter with a brief summary of the Jewish presence in Tsarist Russia and continue with Odessa's pre-Revolutionary history (1794–1917). Then I turn to Soviet reforms as experienced by Jews in Odessa and elsewhere in the ex-Russian Empire and the subsequent changes in policy that directly and indirectly affected their lives during the later phase of Soviet rule. My goal is twofold: first, I aim to present a coherent summary of the history of Odessa's Jewish population and, second, using Odessa's

history, I want to build on and, to some degree, question earlier accounts of pre-Soviet and Soviet Jewish reality encountered in historical and sociological accounts today.

Jews and the Russian Empire

The origins of early Jewish settlements in the territory of the Russian Empire are in many respects uncertain. We are told by numerous historians that Jews initially settled on the northern shores of the Black Sea as part of the Greek colonies that were developing in the early centuries of the Christian era (Baron 1987:2; Pinkus 1988:2; Dubnow 1916:1–13). Among these early settlers were Crimean Jews and a sect of Karaites (followers of Karaism).²⁸ During the Middle Ages, the Jewish presence and influence in the territory (which later became part of the Russian Empire) grew with the birth of the Kingdom of Khazaria (located in the lower Volga and Crimea) where Judaism was one of the three religions (along with Christianity and Islam) accepted and practiced by the ruling elite in an attempt to depart from paganism (Pinkus 1988:3). Khazaria and its Jews played an important role in international trade between the Caliphate in Baghdad and the Byzantine Empire. However, the expansion of the Principdom of Kiev into the Khazar region in the years 966–69 brought an end to Khazarian prosperity and lessened the influence of the Jewish population in the region (1988:3).

During the growth and development of Kievan Russia, Christianity (in its Greek Orthodox form) was accepted as the religion of Russian people.²⁹ Despite this change in religious orientation, Jews continued to reside in Kiev and Crimea where, as merchants and tradesman, they served as the link between Western Europe, the Black Sea provinces and the Asiatic continent (Dubnow 1926). After the fall of Kiev (1240) to

²⁸ A branch of Judaism that rejects the Oral Law.

²⁹ According to a popular legend reproduced in ancient Russian chronicles, Jews initially participated in the competition between religions to overcome paganism in Russia. However, Vladimir, Prince of Kiev, ruled against Judaism on the basis that Jews did not have a homeland and were a scattered, abandoned people “rejected by God” (Baron 1987:4).

Mongol rule, Russia remained in a state of conquest for over two centuries (Markowitz 1984:21). Then, under the leadership of Ivan III, the Principality of Moscow regained control over Russia's territory and relocated the capital of the Empire to Moscow, where, as Baron explains, the prevailing xenophobia of both the Russian masses and their rulers kept out the Jews and other foreigners (1987:6).³⁰

Repressive measures by the Tsars followed in the 15th century and continued throughout the 16th century, and forced many Jews to convert to Russian Orthodoxy or be expelled. Subsequent rulers adhered to the policy of their predecessors and kept Jews away from their domains by prohibiting Jewish settlement in Russia's capital (Baron 1987:8). Even with the coming of Peter the Great (1682–1725), widely known for his Westernizing and modernizing influence, Jews were no closer to participating in the public life of the country. However, converted Jews were welcomed into his court. After his rule, Jews were formally expelled from their country in the middle of the 18th century, with as many as 35,000 Jews deported from Russian territory during the rule of Elizabeth Petrovna (Baron 1987:11).

It was only in the late 18th century that a large Jewish population became a permanent feature of the Russian Empire. During the partitions of Poland in 1772, 1793 and 1795 Russia, under the rule of Catherine II (the Great) (1762–96), annexed a number of Polish territories and consequently acquired their large Jewish populations. The strategic gains for Catherine's Russia thus also opened a new chapter for its new inhabitants – the Jews.³¹ In the words of Dubnow, "The country which had stood in fear of a few thousand Jews was now forced to accept them, at one stroke, by the tens of thousands and, shortly afterwards, by the hundreds of thousands" (1916:261).

³⁰ The Jews, we are told, were also feared for their possible Judaizing (conversions of non-Jews to Judaism) and judged for being "enemies of Christ" (Baron 1987:11).

³¹ In addition to the large number of Jews, Catherine's dominions now included millions of Poles, Lithuanians, Baltic Germans and Tatars, whose faiths and cultures also redefined the environments of Russian Empire (Baron 1987:14).

The attitude of the empress toward the Jews, and other ethnic and religious minorities, was mixed, reflecting both her traditionalist doctrine (embodied in the Russian church and her predecessors) and the rationalist doctrines of enlightenment and mercantilism, which Catherine prized. Moreover, the Tsaritsa wanted to expand and strengthen her empire by establishing a warm-water port (Mazis 2004:17).

Persuaded by the idea that Jews could be helpful in trade and industry, Catherine's early legislation was positive and rather liberal toward the Jews. Jewish citizens were for the first time invited to join the ranks of the three guilds of merchants³² and townsmen (Baron 1987:15–16). They were allowed to practice their religion and were granted permission to participate (both as voters and candidates) in local municipalities. Meanwhile, the *kehillahs* (Jewish self-governing councils) continued to preside over internal Jewish affairs. However, the freedom that Jews experienced in trade, religious practice and politics under Catherine's early years were soon curbed due to external pressures (upheavals following the partitions of Poland, fear of the French Revolution etc.) and the country's internal stress (complaints of Moscow merchants, the Church etc.) (Pinkus 1988:12–13). Restrictions were initially made on the economic sphere of Jewish activity, which later extended to the political sphere of civil rights and eventually eradicated the internal autonomy of Jewish citizens.³³ Catherine's later edicts of 1791 and 1794 restricted the areas of Jewish residence and implemented double taxation for Jewish merchants and townsmen in the region (Pinkus 1988:13; Dubnow 1925:318). Many historians believe that this discriminatory legislation laid the foundation for the Jewish Pale of Settlement, which was officially constituted in 1835 and lasted until 1917 (see Appendix 1 for a map of The Pale). This was the only area where Jews were free to reside permanently, unless they had special

³² Under the Russian Empire, individuals who owned property worth more than 500 rubles could register as members of the merchant class, according to the following scale: the first guild, at least 10,000 rubles; the second guild, between 1,000 and 10,000; the third guild, between 500 and 1,000; those owning less than 500 rubles' worth of property were registered as townsmen. Jewish merchants were granted the privilege of admission to the guilds in 1780 (Pinkus 1988:12).

³³ For a fuller explanation of the restrictions passed during Catherine the Great's rule, see Pinkus (1988:13) and Baron (1987:13–17).

permission to live elsewhere (Markowitz 1993:22). Movements within and outside the Pale were regulated by an internal passport system under which all residents including Jews (defined as such on the basis of their religion) were registered.

In 1897, according to Russia's first state-wide census, 5.2 million Jews resided in this area of the country, where they made up 4 percent of the total population (Nathans 2002:4; Slezkine 2004:105).³⁴ It is important to remember that the Pale was by no means a homogeneous geographical, ethnic or cultural unit – and neither was Russia's large Jewish contingent. Rather, different areas of the Pale experienced diverse processes of cultural development throughout their history, attracted different type of Jews and provided different living conditions (Zipperstein 1986:13).³⁵ Writing about the last years of the 19th century, Gitelman describes how Jews in different parts of the Pale started to diverge in attitudes toward their Jewishness as a result of internal and external forces affecting their everyday life:

The vast majority remained firmly rooted in their traditional primordial identities, something which was as much part of them as their own skin, assumed, unquestioned and perhaps unexamined. Others examined their Jewishness and found it wanting. They turned to enlightenment in an attempt to synthesize Jewishness and modernity, or they abandoned Jewishness altogether for Christianity and Russian culture or for socialism and "internationalist" culture. (2001[1988]:8)

Whatever choices Jewish families and individuals made, it is clear that departures from traditional values and the presence of other social influences brought about new identifications, orientations and associations, which some Jews expressed toward other Jews as well as non-Jews.

³⁴ All but 300,000 Jews, as Gitelman notes, resided within the Pale. Those outside included 60,000 Georgian and Mountain Jews living in the Caucasus as well as 50,000 residents of Central Asia and Siberia. The rest were mainly concentrated in urban areas where they made up the majority of the population in the cities of Belorussia and Lithuania, and about 30 percent of Ukraine's city population (2001[1988]:28–29; Nathans 2002:4).

³⁵ The Pale can be roughly divided into three distinct areas: Lithuania–Belorussia, Ukraine and New Russia, on the basis of different historical backgrounds, ethnic composition, size of Jewish population, urban or rural settings, cultural elements and level of industrialization – which all had an effect on the acculturation of Jews in their territory (Zipperstein 1986:13–14).

Jews in the City of Odessa

"If a Jew from the Pale of Settlement does not dream about America or Palestine, then you know he'll be in Odessa."

Svirskii (1904:169) quoted in Weinberg (1993:9)

The city of Odessa was founded in the wake of the second Russo-Turkish war in 1794, when Russian forces, led by Don Joseph de Ribas, a half-Spanish, half-Irish military commander under Catherine the Great, conquered the Turkish fort of Khadzhibei. The new settlement in the province of Novorosiya (New Russia)³⁶ was of strategic importance for international trade and, Catherine believed, would serve as a highly valuable port in the region. Eager to develop the sparsely settled lands and attract labor, she offered a number of valuable incentives to attract new settlers. The lure of individual freedom was attractive to many Russian subjects – especially runaway serfs. In addition, the Russian government offered new arrivals sizable land grants and other generous inducements in the form of monetary loans, exemption from taxes and relief from military service. As a result, many new settlers arrived, including communities of Russians, Ukrainian, Greeks, Albanians, Moldavians, Armenians, Jews, Bulgarians and Germans who chose to settle on the shores of the Black Sea.

Moreover, the empress's commercial policies actively promoted trade, which allowed foreign merchants from Greece, Italy, Galicia and other parts of the world to establish brokerage houses in Odessa, facilitating the international and bustling aura of the city. The regime of the Duc de Richelieu (1803–14) and his successors, the Count de Langeron (1815–22) and Michael Vorontsov (1822–56), further stimulated migration to the region by consolidating the policies of Catherine II. As Skinner documents, Odessa displayed one of the most dynamic growth rates in 19th-century Russia – comparable only to the American cities of Chicago and San Francisco. "In the period of 1800–92 alone, the population [of Odessa] increased by an astonishing 3,677 percent compared

³⁶ New Russia consisted of the provinces of Ekaterinoslav, Taurida, Kherson (where Odessa was located), acquired in the 18th century and, after 1828, Bessarabia (Weinberg 1993:3).

to rates of 220 percent for Moscow, 323 percent for St Petersburg" (1986:209–211). During this time, the second largest group of immigrants, surpassed only by the Russians, was the Jews. In 1892 the city's total population reached 404,000, of which there were: 198,233 Russians; 124,511 Jews; 37,925 Ukrainians; 17,395 Poles; and 25,751 other foreigners (Zipperstein 1986:32). By 1897, nearly 100 years after its birth, Odessa was home to 138,935 Jews – who accounted for one-third of the total population (Herlihy 1986:251; Rozenboim 2007:33). According to the same census, 32 percent of the population spoke Yiddish, nearly 50 percent spoke Russian and a mere 5.6 percent of Odessans relied on Ukrainian as their native tongue (Ascherson 2007:140).³⁷ For the Jews, Odessa quickly turned into a little heaven on the border of the Pale where they could experience an equality of rights unattainable in other areas of the country.

At different periods of Odessa's development, various types of Jewish settlers arrived from within and from outside the Pale. While the earliest migrants were for the most part single unmarried men looking for employment and a new place to start their lives, later migrants arrived with families and were attracted by the potential they saw in Russia's grain trade and other possibilities the new Black Sea port might offer. By the mid 1800s, as Zipperstein describes, "Odessa was transformed from a modest seaport into a city of international importance, offering Jewish residents a range of opportunities rarely encountered in the Pale of Settlement" (1986:36). Its status as a *Porto Franco* (free port) (1819–59) further secured Odessa's pre-eminent commercial position (Richardson 2004:11) and prosperity in grain and other export goods, which were exempt from the otherwise heavy burden of tax.³⁸ By the end of the 19th century, "Odessa was ranked as Russia's number one port for foreign trade ... handling the shipment of nearly all the wheat and more than half of the other grains exported from Russia" (Weinberg 1993:2). The city's commercial success was further secured by

³⁷ These statistics do not take into account the bilingual population of Jews and others.

³⁸ Imported goods were taxed but at a much lower rate than in other ports, making Odessa the cheapest place to live in Russia (Gubar and Rozenboim 2003:80).

the railway network that, from the 1860s and 1870s, connected the city to the interior and the Caucasus and guaranteed delivery of goods across the country (1993:4).³⁹

Unlike other areas in the territory of the Pale where competition in trade and industry led to anti-Jewish sentiment, Odessa's ruling elite welcomed competition in trade and labor and thrived on the city's lucrative achievements.⁴⁰ Jews were active in Odessa's commerce from the outset and valued for their commercial trading skills. Starting with the export of salt, Jews later dominated trade in other commodities such as silk, cotton, wool, hardware, iron, and shoes (Zipperstein 1986:36).

A number of other developments were important in setting Jewish Odessa apart from the greater circumference of the Pale and the Russian Empire. Unlike the majority of Russian, Ukrainian and Polish cities where Jews primarily lived in segregated areas, early Jewish settlers arriving in Odessa were not restricted. Rather, Jews settled freely throughout the city, and thus were exposed to an array of cultural practices by their Italian, Greek, Romanian, Bulgarian, Russian, Ukrainian and other neighbors (1986:39).⁴¹ Although Odessa enjoyed what many scholars describe as a cosmopolitan⁴² sociality from the outset, historians debate whether it is appropriate to describe it as a "melting pot," due to the relatively limited interaction of various ethnic groups outside the marketplace (Mazis 2004:25).

Nonetheless, the high level of integration Jews found in trade, the geographical location of Odessa (far from any major center of Judaism), the city's openness to varied ethnic and religious practices and its materialism had started to have an effect in the erosion of traditional values experienced by Odessa's Jewish contingent (Zipperstein 1986:36–37). All these processes reinforced popular Yiddish sayings that

³⁹ See Herlihy (1986:215–222) for a detailed description of Odessa's railroad and its effect on the local economy.

⁴⁰ This is not to say that Jews did not suffer from the grass roots violence during their years of residency in Odessa. Outbreaks occurred in 1821, 1859, 1871, 1881, 1900 and 1905 (Weinberg 1992:248–289).

⁴¹ Nonetheless, a number of streets and areas of the city did serve as centers of Jewish communal life due to the concentrated number of Jewish inhabitants and communal institutions (Rozenboim 2006:34).

⁴² See the Conclusion chapter for discussion of scholarly debates around cosmopolitanism in general and that of Odessa in particular.

associated the city with indifference to religion: "Seven miles around Odessa burn the fires of Hell" and, referring to their life of comfort, "To live like God in Odessa" (Zipperstein 1986:1). Summarizing Finkel's argument, Zipperstein writes:

In an effort to adapt their social positions to their new economic standing, some Jews, a decade before the Galician immigrants (who arrived in Odessa around the 1820s), had already abandoned certain religious rituals and practices and tried to make themselves appear less distinct and foreign to the non-Jews. (1986:37)

It is important to note that, among other motives, the sheer practicality of using the Russian language and a less strict code of observance in trade and daily encounters led many members of Odessa's Jewish Jewry to drift away from the more traditional lifestyle still followed by others of their generation.⁴³ A number of influential Jews also looked to Odessa as a place of intellectual pursuit on the grounds that the weight of traditional Jewish values was weaker among the heterogeneous Jewish population. The migration of Galician Jews (mostly from the city of Brody) further diversified Odessa's Jewish population. Brody Jews were by far the wealthiest of all of Odessa's Jewry, strongly oriented toward trade, and more liberal and progressive in their religious observance. Taking a leading role in the functions of middlemen, factory owners, managers and agents in the grain trade, Brody Jews worked closely with the Greek and the Italian merchants, who at the time still controlled most of the export trade (Zipperstein 1986:42). Within a few years of their arrival in the city, Brody Jews dominated most of the important positions within the Jewish population and had taken over the local *kehillah* and thus all major community decisions. Among them were many adherents of the German-based 18th-century Jewish Enlightenment

⁴³ This process of cultural transformation was not supported by all or without conflict. For example, Zipperstein (1986:37) mentions a famous incident, commonly cited by Odessan historians: in 1817 the city's rabbi, Berish ben Yisrael Usher of Nemirov, was beaten on the street by several Jews who were unhappy with his stringent approach to the observance of ritual law. Similarly, he describes the opposition of "traditional Jews" to the Odessa school administered by the *maskillim* citing an incident when rocks were thrown at students and teachers of the school (Zipperstein 1986: 48). In general, however, he argues that traditionalist opposition to Jewish "reform" was "muted" and "neutralized" (1986:49).

movement known as *Haskalah*. Supporters of the *Haskalah* movement, Odessa's *maskilim*, were eager to connect their city's Jewish population with the greater world they inhabited, without necessarily abandoning their Jewish identity. As early as 1826, immigrants from Galicia had opened a modern Jewish school, the first of its kind in all of Russia, where education was provided in both secular and Jewish subjects (Zipperstein 1986:43; Gubar and Rozenboim 2003:91). Fifteen years later, Odessa became home to the first Reform Synagogue in the Russian Empire and, by the turn of the century, services were accompanied by organ music; seats were individually sold to members of the congregation.



5 Brodskaya (Brody) Synagogue, currently used to house city archives

According to city legends retold by elderly Jews, the services of the German-born Rabbi Schwabacher (who served as Odessa's official rabbi from 1860 to 1888) were even attended by a number of non-Jewish Odessans attracted by the musical prayers conducted on *Shabbat* and Jewish holidays. By the 1850s, Zipperstein notes, "*Haskalah* ideas had expanded beyond the confines of *maskilim* circles and had touched the lives of many other Jews in the city" (1986:55). "Perhaps nowhere in the Pale was acculturation more pervasive than in Odessa" (Zipperstein 1986:20).

In Odessa, Jews could enjoy a cultural life enriched by music, theatre and opera performances from around the world.⁴⁴ Odessa's love of music and theatre was so great that it prompted some to characterize it as "the musical city of the empire" (Mazis 2004:27). As Gitelman documents, the city of Odessa was more open to the general culture than the rest of the Pale and was the nurturing ground for half a dozen world-famous violinists including Mischa Elman and David Oistrakh (2001[1988]:47; see also Zipperstein 1986:66).

Much of the socializing in early 19th-century Odessa took place in the popular setting of cafes and coffee houses, which lured many clients with their "graceful verandas or tables simply placed under plantains and acacias on shady, picturesque streets;" because of the "similarities with the French capital ... Odessits liked calling their city 'Little Paris'" (Gubar and Rozenboim 2003:102). Within and outside the city, Odessa's Jews quickly earned the reputation of being an assimilated, modern, Europeanized and Russified Jewish community whose range of institutions and tenor of communal life were increasingly and self consciously becoming enlightened (Zipperstein 1986:69). Meanwhile, Odessa continued to represent an "El Dorado" of economic opportunity for Jews and others (Tanny 2007; Herlihy 1986:240, 253).

In the second half of the 1800s, Odessa's progressive atmosphere was on the rise. Jews were becoming prominent members of the city council, supporting a wide network of philanthropic organizations (which worked toward Jewish and non-Jewish causes) and establishing themselves as writers, journalists, lawyers, and members of the local intelligentsia.⁴⁵ The level of education Jews received was also rising. Not only did Odessa's Jews benefit from the Reform schooling introduced by the *maskilim* but

⁴⁴ Zipperstein writes, "Jews flocked to the opera house and were said to nearly monopolize its seats, usually those in the hall's least expensive sections." But, by the 1860s, he adds, many sat in the stalls. "Even Jews with sidecurls attended" (1986:65–66).

⁴⁵ In 1890 Jews made up 68 percent of all apprentice lawyers on the Odessa judicial circuit (Slezkine 2004:125). Jews were also highly represented in professions such as medicine (30 percent), engineering (30 percent) and politics (nearly 50 percent of local Duma representatives) (Gubar and Rozenboim 2003:91; Zipperstein 1986:75).

Jews were also increasingly taught in non-Jewish institutions or received their education abroad.⁴⁶ By the end of the 1880s Odessa featured prominently in the Russian Jewish Enlightenment and represented a home to many of its intellectuals,⁴⁷ who set up a number of secular Jewish institutions (including literary societies, libraries and publishing houses) (see Veidlinger 2009). As one Odessa-based newspaper described in the 1870s, "If one can speak of a center of the Jewish intelligentsia where self-*emancipation* is becoming a reality, this without doubt is Odessa" (quoted in Zipperstein 1986:74). Odessa was also one of the major cities outside Saint Petersburg where the Society for the Promotion of Enlightenment among Jews functioned to spread Russian language, culture, literature and learning among Russia's Jews. The Russian language was, as elsewhere in the Russian Empire, used more frequently by Jewish intellectuals and others who preferred its practical benefits and elite status compared with Yiddish or Hebrew. In describing the outlook of the intellectual circles who, to use the author's phrase, "*converted to the Pushkin faith*," Slezkine writes:

Young Jews were not just learning Russian the same way they were learning Hebrew: they were learning Russian in order to replace Hebrew, as well as Yiddish, for good. Like German, Polish, or Hungarian in other high-culture areas, Russian had become the Hebrew of the secular world ... If the Russian world stood for speech, knowledge, freedom and light, then the Jewish world represented silence, ignorance, bondage, and darkness (2004:128, 136)

At the same time, as Klier brings to our attention, Odessa was the birthplace of a modern Jewish press in Russian, Yiddish and Hebrew (2002:175). It is important to note that Odessan Jews were not all Enlightenment activists or members of the

⁴⁶ In 1886, every third student at Odessa University was Jewish and over 40 percent of all medical and law students were Jews (Slezkine 2005:124–125).

⁴⁷ Among some of the most prominent figures of the 19th century were: historian Simon Dubnow, writers Sholem Aleichem (Sholem Nahum Rabinovitch), Mordekhai Ben-Ami (Mark Rabinovitch) and Mendeley Mocher-Sforim (Sholom Abramovitch), author of the famous pamphlet *Autoemancipation*, Leon Pinsker, the philosopher and publicist Ahad Ha'am and the Yiddish poet, Chaim-Nahman Bialik.

intelligentsia.⁴⁸ Nor were many ordinary Jewish residents analyzing modernization in ideological terms. Many of the city's Jews simply welcomed new trends which they adopted into their pattern of living mainly for practical reasons. While the *maskilim* set up the institutions and dialogue supporting modernization, their efforts were not the sole force driving the momentum of development Odessa saw in its day (Zipperstein 1986:153). As the city's early Jewish history reveals, 100 years after its founding, Odessa had managed to transform its Jews by providing them with a setting in which they could engage in new and different intellectual, cultural, economic and religious pursuits more freely than in areas of traditional Jewish settlement (Weinberg 1993:10). As Zipperstein writes:

Ninety percent of the city's Jewish owned shops were now, according to some accounts, open on the Sabbath; Jews carried money on Saturdays chatted in cafes, and when rushing off to mourner's prayer, put out their still-smoldering cigarettes on the synagogue's outer walls. Neither fathers nor sons went to synagogue regularly; religious observance in general was erratic, and the same individual might fast on a minor holy day and then desecrate the Sabbath ... Even in the 1830s pious Jews were spotted in the local opera house, despite the religious prohibition against listening to women sing, and large numbers of Jewish children were in attendance at the modern Jewish school ... despite widespread Russian Jewish fear of secular education. By the 1850s, prayer in the major synagogue was designed along self-consciously *maskilim* and "Germanic" lines. (1986:131, 151)

This is not to say that Jews in Odessa did not practice Judaism or subscribe to it as a way of life. At the beginning of the 20th century the city was home to close to 70 synagogues and prayer houses. Most of them occupied small rented spaces or donated by local landlords but around ten synagogues were in specially built structures (Rozenboim 2007:38).⁴⁹ Even a smaller synagogue required the presence of at least ten

⁴⁸ Jewish Immigrants also worked as laborers, tailors, wagoners and cleaners while others occupied themselves with other, less lawful, professions such as thieves, prostitutes, hawkers and hooligans. For a detailed description of Jewish occupational ranks in Odessa, see Polishchuk (2002:319–321).

⁴⁹ During the Soviet period, most of the synagogues were closed down and used for various non-religious purposes (for example, gym facilities or storage) (Gubar and Rozenboim 2003:70). Only one synagogue remained open in the city that did not have regular prayer but, according to my informants,

men for daily prayer. Synagogues in Odessa were subdivided by professions – providing separate spaces for prayer and rituals to traders, wagoners, tailors, bakers, shoemakers and even vendors of lemons – who adjusted their working hours for observance. On the whole, however, Odessa was never regarded as a highly religious place in contrast to other destinations in the Pale such as Vilna, commonly known as the “Jerusalem of Lithuania” or Lvov, regarded as the “mother of Israel” (Hrytsak and Susak 2003:145).⁵⁰ Summarizing Odessa’s early history, Klier concludes that the city “was the most ‘un-Jewish’ of Jewish cities from the traditional point of view, and the most ‘Jewish’ from the perspective of non-traditional Jewish life and attitudes” (2002:173).⁵¹

Jewish activity in the city was periodically curbed by internal disputes that erupted in anti-Jewish violence. These occurrences, according to Zipperstein, caused many Jewish intellectuals to “re-evaluate their support of progress, enlightenment and what they saw as modernity” (1986:128). Pogroms, which ravaged Odessa’s Jewish life, were rooted in various socioeconomic, political, and cultural realities, and presented Jews as dangerous to the society, overly successful in trade or too prominent for their

did provide services for the major holidays. The return of other synagogue buildings to their original purpose began only after the fall of the USSR in 1991.

⁵⁰ In the second half of the 19th century, as Zipperstein writes, the Brody (Reform) Synagogue “became the model for Jewish prayer in the city, and the older Beit Knesset Ha-Gadol [eventually known as Glavnaya (Main) Synagogue used by traditional Orthodox Jews] was transformed in its image” (1986:57). As Zipperstein further explains, “there does not seem to have been a large Hasidic community in Odessa at the time [1860] (1986:47–48) although some distinguished Hasidim, like the *tsadik* (righteous religious leader) Dovid Twersky visiting Odessa were joyfully welcomed in the city. According to Osip Rabinovich, an Odessan notary, journalist and editor of the Russian language Jewish newspaper *Razsvet* (Dawn) writing in 1860’s “Hasidism perhaps still flourished in tiny isolated townlets, but not in large cities like Odessa. All of Jewish Odessa...had shown an unmistakable willingness to move forward with the times” (quoted in Zipperstein 1986:104). In his extreme view “Hasidic wonderworkers were isolated and scorned, approached only by the poorest, most unfortunate women; and so they viewed the city as the source of ‘neither gold nor fame,’ indeed as an ‘empire of hell’” (quoted in Zipperstein 1986:105).

⁵¹ Zipperstein also highlights that “long before Jews in other centers of the Pale would come to place their trust in Jewish leadership whose convictions or ritual practices they knew to be less than traditional, maskilim and acculturated Jews in Odessa were the standard-bearers of their community” (1986: 64).

minority status.⁵² During these tragic events Jewish businesses were destroyed, homes were vandalized, and Jewish lives were threatened and lost in the waves of violence. Such actions and sentiments not only spoiled the Jewish and non-Jewish relations in the city but also led to early waves of Jewish emigration.⁵³ These troubles were not unique to Odessa: between 1891 and 1910 nearly one million Jews fled the Russian Empire due to pogroms and other worsening conditions (Gitelman 2001[1988]:17–18). During this period, the infamous 1882 May Laws passed by the Tsar further contributed to the decline of the social position of the Jews, who were now prohibited from working on Sundays, or outside the Pale, and highly taxed on their business transactions (Herlihy 1986:253). In Odessa, however, these laws were not fully implemented, and Jews from the countryside of the Pale continued to flow down to the area of the Black Sea (Ascherson 2007:140). Despite the outflow of Russia's Jews from the rest of the country, Odessa's Jewish population quickly recovered its losses and, mainly due to immigration, continued to grow well into the 20th century.

The 20th Century and the Effects of Soviet Rule

By the early 1900s Odessa's 160,000 Jews, out of a total of 511,000 inhabitants, formed an integral part of its economy and society – but Odessa, although the fourth largest city in the Russian Empire (after Saint Petersburg, Moscow and Warsaw), started to decline in production and trade (Herlihy 1986:251).⁵⁴ The political turmoil

⁵² According to Herlihy, many of the earlier moments of friction (1821, 1849, 1859, 1871 and 1881) were limited to specific animosity between Greeks and Jews and the riots themselves did not take on major proportions (1986:299). However the pogrom of 1905 that swept through Odessa was on a quite different scale. According to the police report issued after the events, "400 Jews and 100 non-Jews were killed and approximately 300 people, mostly Jews, were injured, with slightly over 1,600 Jewish houses, apartments, and stores incurring damage" (Weinberg 1992:248). Also, see Humphrey (forthcoming) for a detailed account of Odessa's pogroms and a discussion of how pogroms happened in a city famed for its cosmopolitanism.

⁵³ By 1904 the percentage of Jews in the city had dropped from 35 percent to 30.5 percent and, in the aftermath of the 1905 pogrom alone, nearly 50,000 Jews left Odessa (Herlihy 1986:258).

⁵⁴ Weinberg links the decline of Odessa to a number of short-term events (such as bad harvests) and long-term trends (such as recession, unemployment, decline of the port facilities, competition and the

and pogroms, which erupted again in the city and elsewhere in 1905, served to set off the previously muted ethnic tensions of the population, and showed the underlying lack of stability of the Tsar's government. World War I, the 1917 Revolution and the Civil War also had a great impact on Odessa's political, social, and economic well-being. By the time the Soviet regime came to power in 1920, the city had changed hands seven times and suffered a major outflow of its population (see Guthier 1981:175). In the early phases of Soviet rule, Odessa was still considered a Russian Jewish city (1981:166).⁵⁵ According to the new policy passed by the government, Jews were no longer defined as a religious minority but, rather, as one of the many nationalities of the greater milieu of equal Soviet men and women. This sense of equality brought many Jews eager for mobility to the frontlines of Party activity. Even prior to the 1917 Revolution, Odessa had been home to a great many revolutionary and political organizations, which for the most part functioned underground. As well, the city had become one of the most active centers of Zionist activity in all of the Russian Empire. It was here, following the 1881 pogrom, that Leon Pinsker wrote his famous pamphlet *Autoemancipation* where he argued that "anti-Semitism was a disease endemic to Europe" and urged Jews to emigrate to Zion (Gitelman 2001[1988]:18). Pinsker's call was developed by other Odessan activists, including Vladimir Jabotinsky, who insisted on the creation of the Jewish homeland in the territory of Palestine and not in Ghana, as had been proposed by others. Many Zionist efforts were initiated by the Palestine Committee (founded in the 1880s), which worked to relocate Jews from the Russian Empire to the territories of what would become the state of Israel. At the beginning of the 1900s Odessa was commonly known as the "Gateway to Zion" for the frequent voyages made from its port to Haifa on the famous ship *Ruslan* (Misuk 2007:52–54). Its continual crossings until 1927

Russo-Japanese war, which cut off maritime and trade connections with the Far East) (1993:20; see also Herlihy 1986:295–296).

⁵⁵ According to the 1926 census, the city's ethnic constitution was: 39 percent Russian, 36.7 percent Jewish and 17.6 percent Ukrainian (Guthier 1981:75).

served as a means for many Russian Jews from all around the country to test their lives in the land of Palestine (Oz 2004:57).

For those Jews who remained in Odessa, life also drastically changed. Soviet policy toward Jews was inconsistent.⁵⁶ In its first 20 years of operation, the Soviet government made Jews equal with other Soviets and rewarded those who helped motivate their cause. But, later decisions of Stalin's regime reversed earlier commitments by persecuting Jews as members of the intelligentsia and as "rootless cosmopolitans." The changing and contradictory policies of the USSR make it nearly impossible to discuss Soviet Jewish history in terms of any one standardized stance. In the words of one of my informants, Soviet government actions were similar to bouts of malaria – sporadic outbreaks followed by periods of stabilization. This volatile behavior of the state made it all the more difficult for Jews to judge their state of acceptance into the society at any one time. One of the tactics by which Soviet leaders displayed this divided loyalty to their Jewish masses was vividly displayed in its language policy, simultaneously promoting Yiddish (perceived as the proletarian language of the Jews) through education, theatre and the newspapers, while banning Hebrew.⁵⁷ In Odessa, however, my informants told me that, while many religious and Hebrew-language organizations still existed late into the 1920s, they suffered from lack of popular interest rather than from prohibition of their activity. On the whole, Jews in Odessa followed the greater Soviet trend of assimilation, as shown in the practices of intermarriage,⁵⁸ adoption of the Russian language and culture, and adherence to socialist values promoted by the government. The Jews, in Slezkine's view, "seemed much more Soviet than the rest of the Soviet Union" (2004:247).

⁵⁶ Kotkin asserts that inconsistencies, contradictions and policy turnarounds were part of the larger reality for all Soviet men and women: "living socialism according to the perceived rules made for its share of surprises ... new categories of thinking suddenly appeared, old ones were modified; nothing stood still" (1995:356).

⁵⁷ For discussions of Soviet Yiddish popular culture, see Shternshis (2006) and Veidlinger (2000, 2009).

⁵⁸ Slezkine documents the rate of intermarriage by Jewish men as increasing between 1924 and 1936 as follows: from 1.9 to 12.6 percent in Byelorussia (Belarus), from 3.7 to 15.3 percent in Ukraine, and from 17.4 to 42.3 percent in the Russian Republic (Russian Federation) (2004:179).

As equal as their Soviet status seemed, the re-introduction of internal passports in 1932 presented another challenge to Soviet Jews: how to be both culturally assimilated and legally estranged. Being legally defined as a Jew, as inscribed in one's passport under the heading of "nationality," opened Jews to quotas and other official and unofficial tactics of discrimination and forced many to change their names in order to avoid conflict or simply as a means of assimilation. For these reasons, children of mixed families were often registered according to the nationality of the non-Jewish parent and some never revealed the fact that they were Jewish at all.⁵⁹ A number of Jews I met in Odessa had only recently learned of their Jewish descent. Soviet-era Jews could hardly have imagined that a time would come when the distinction between being Jewish or non-Jewish would come into play even more prominently, as it did during WWII.

The German invasion of the USSR in June 1941 began the Great Patriotic War (the Eastern Front in WWII), which took the lives of some 27 million Soviet subjects and left vast numbers permanently maimed. Romanian forces collaborating with Nazi Germany invaded the city on October 16, 1941 after a 73- day siege, during which many of the city's inhabitants managed to flee.⁶⁰ Nearly 40-50 percent of the Jewish population (an estimated 80-90 thousand)-including men drafted into the Soviet Army-managed to evacuate the city (Borowoy 2001:17).⁶¹ Following the Romanian invasion, Odessa was declared the capital of Transnistria (an area of 40,000 square kilometers which lies between two rivers, the Dnestr and the Bug in Southern Ukraine which existed from August 1941 until March 1944) (Gevin 2003:107, see also Ofer

⁵⁹ Feuchtwang notes that secret Jewish ancestry was also a common thread in the history of Jewish assimilation in Germany, where even children of mixed marriages or Jews converted to Christianity were stigmatized (2007:9).

⁶⁰ Gevin cites a letter from the Romanian Marshal Ion Antonescu referring to the siege of Odessa. "The War in general and the battles in Odessa in particular, proved beyond the shadow of a doubt that *the Jew is the devil ... hence our enormous casualties. Without the Jewish commissars, we would have been in Odessa long ago*" (2003:128, emphasis in original).

⁶¹ The population of Odessa before 1939 was approximately 600,000 people, about 180,000 of whom were Jews (Ofer 1993:136).

1993:133).⁶² Despite the critical situation, many Odessans initially decided to stay. Some families remained behind afraid of the difficulties of evacuation, others could not leave behind elderly and ill family members and yet others could not imagine that the Germans would have it in their plans to execute all of the Jewish nation (Borowoy 2001:17). Even among the Jews I met, there were some whose relatives had insisted on staying (see Nina's story in Chapter 2). The day after Odessa was invaded Romanian officials ordered all Jews to turn up for official registration (Inber 1981:79). Directly from the point of registration nearly 3,000 to 4,000 Jews were taken to jail where most were brutally tortured before being herded to the seaside and shot (Arad 2009:240). Mass killings of Jews intensified after the headquarters of the Tenth Romanian Division was bombed on October 22nd 1941 by the retreating Soviet Armies. Although the explosion of the building was a military action, the Romanian government saw it as a sabotage act committed by the Jews. Nearly 5,000 people, "the majority of whom were Jews, were seized and shot or hanged on the streets of Odessa" (Gevin 2003:129; see also Borowoy 2001:19). One of the most horrific scenes, Borowoy describes, was the image of Aleksandrovsky Prospect (one of Odessa's central streets) where hundreds of dead bodies were hanging along the alley (2001:19). The next day the Romanian officials "ordered the execution of the remaining hostages" and "close to 19,000 Jews were gathered into four barracks on the outskirts of Odessa and then shot or burned alive" (Gevin 2003:129). Thousands of Jews were cramped into jails where many died in horrific circumstances. The remainder of Jewish residents were ordered to gather in the newly created ghetto in Slobodka (located on the outskirts of the city). Some Jews managed to stay in hiding but after the Romanian officials issued an order that "those guilty of hiding Jews would be put to death", (Gevin 2003:133) most Jews were forced to go to the Slobodka ghetto from where tens of thousands were deported to death camps in Domanevka, Bogdanovska and Achmechetka, where most died either in route or during

⁶² Transnistria was created and given its name by Hitler "to compensate Romania for the regions of Transylvania and southern Dobrudja, which had been lost to Hungary and Bulgaria" (Ofer 1993:133).

imprisonment (Gesin 2003:131–132).⁶³ As one Odessan put it “The Jews who died in the first days of the occupation were the fortunate ones” (Inber 1981:81).

Despite the danger involved, some non-Jewish Odessans risked their lives and hid Jews in their homes or helped them escape the city with forged documentation (see Inber 1981:89–91). Unfortunately there were also those who collaborated with the Romanian regime (mainly members of the local police and ethnic German volunteers who formed their own SS Police) and helped the occupiers in their execution of Jews and others (see Gesin 2003:139–140).

During the Romanian occupation an estimated 120,000 Jews perished in Odessa and the death camps in the region.⁶⁴ In a span of only four days 48,000 Jews were murdered in the Bogdanovka camp, “a record unsurpassed ... even by the death factories of Majdanek or Auschwitz” (Gesin 2003:137). In Achmechka 4,000 captured inmates died from hunger and most of the 18,000 Jews in Domanevka were exterminated in the most brutal ways (Fisher 1969:122–123).⁶⁵ Eighty percent of Odessa’s Jews (who remained in the city and did not or could not evacuate) were annihilated (Gesin 2003:263).

From the time of the Romanian invasion in October 1941 to the day of city’s liberation in April 1944, “the beautiful city of Odessa was transformed into a nightmare of terror, blood and pain” (Gesin 2003:143). Despite the unbearable trauma and suffering, many of those who survived were silent about their experiences, as they feared that their

⁶³ Borowoy explains that, according to the Nazi definition, anyone with a Jewish ancestor on the maternal or paternal line (not specifying the generation) irrelevant of their religious belonging and anyone practicing Judaism was considered a Jew (2001:23). See Gesin (2003:136–139) for detailed descriptions of Domanevka, Achmechetka and Bogdanovka.

⁶⁴ Estimates provided by the Museum of History of Odessa Jews for the Odessa region. Other figures range between 100,000 and 250,000 (see Gidwitz 1997; Borowoy 2001; Inber 1981:83; <http://www.odessapage.com/new/en/odessa-mass-grave-found>).

⁶⁵ The subject of the Holocaust in Ukraine is vast. Constraints of space here limit a fuller discussion of Holocaust events and memory in the Odessa region and beyond. For a more in-depth analysis and detailed account of the Holocaust in the Odessa region see, among others, Gesin (2003:126–150); Ofer (1993); Inber (1981); Fisher (1969:120–125); Litani (1967:135–154); Arad (2009:240–245); Dusman (2001).

survival would be interpreted as the result of collaboration with the Germans. More generally, the entire subject of the Holocaust, as I discuss in Chapter 5, was completely overshadowed by the greater narrative of Soviet suffering under the brutality of Nazi troops. Friedberg, for example, documents how a monument put up not far from Odessa to commemorate the Jews who perished in the area was never unveiled, for "it was remembered that Holocaust memorials must not honor Jews as such, but only Soviet citizens in general" (1991:15).⁶⁶

The War had taken a great toll on Odessa's Jewish, and to a lesser extent non-Jewish, populations but the city continued to benefit from inward migration. Many new settlers were returning from the front or evacuation, moving to the city on work placement orders, or escaping an ever more miserable existence elsewhere and thus, legally and illegally, occupying the houses of those who would never return. Life in post-War Odessa was undoubtedly difficult, although it is a matter of debate whether Odessa suffered the level of Jewish persecution that Moscow, for instance, experienced in the late 1940s and early 1950s, with Stalin's purges of the "cosmopolitan" intelligentsia and the "Doctors' Plot."⁶⁷ Among the elderly Jewish Odessans I spoke to, opinion was divided. For some, these Soviet acts were exemplary of Jewish experience during that time, while others were clear that such attacks and accusations related to a number of specific cases (mostly in the capital) and could not be taken to stand for ordinary Jewish life in Odessa. Yet, historical findings presented by Gitelman speak of an Odessan report which, at the time of the Doctors' Plot, describes how 200 Jewish students were summarily expelled from Odessa University (2001[1988]:159).

⁶⁶ Markowitz also emphasizes that, just as Jewish tragedies were downplayed, so too were Jewish achievements, which went almost entirely unmentioned in official Soviet accounts of the War (1993:40).

⁶⁷ In 1949 a campaign was unleashed to expel "cosmopolitans" – 80 percent of whom were Jews – from the Party and banish them from public and scientific life. One of the most well known examples of Stalin's scheme for the extermination of the country's Jews is known as the "Doctors' Plot" of 1953, where Jewish doctors were arrested (without cause) and charged with conspiring against the state and planning to murder Party leaders (Zemptssov 2001[1991]:21).

Following Stalin's death, many of the charges against persecuted Soviet subjects (including Jews) of acting against the state were dropped but the overall climate of censorship and anti-Jewish quotas remained in effect. Nonetheless, a number of my informants explained, Jews had any number of creative ways to bypass the hurdles put in their path by the Soviet system. Like the inhabitants of Magnitogorsk as described by Kotkin, they were experts in the "rules of the game," including those rules that, although often unspoken, were no less real (1995:154). For instance, Elena, whose story figures in the next chapter, enjoyed access to higher education and a career of her choice by using a Ukrainian name to mask her Jewish descent. Others openly spoke of bribes when describing how they dealt with the system (see also Friedberg 1991:64–65). As Kotkin notes, "ordinary actions undertaken as part of daily life had the effect of realigning, even if only slightly, what might be called the landscape of possibility" for ordinary citizens in the Soviet Union (195:155). Moreover, as shown by many of the stories scattered across this thesis, although anti-Semitism was an undeniable part of the experience of growing up in the Soviet Union, for many Jews its realities were naturalized and accepted as part of ordinary life: it did not play the overwhelming role attributed to it by some authors of Soviet Jewish studies when describing Soviet Jewish reality.⁶⁸ A few informants claimed that they had never experienced discrimination at all, which, in their view, was due to the fact that Odessa was a very "Jewish city" (see Marina's story in Chapter 7). In some instances, Odessan Jews emphasized that discrimination made them work harder and built up the sense of survival necessary in many life circumstances (see Mila's story in Chapter 6).

When the possibility of emigration became a reality for Odessan Jews in the 1970s, and again in the 1990s, some emigrants, I was told, were fleeing from persecution and discrimination but many were simply looking for a better life abroad (see Chapter 6). Ex-Soviet Jewish immigrants whom I met in the United States and Israel during

⁶⁸ For more on the process of normalizing anti-Semitism, see Rapaport, Lomsky-Feder and Hedider (2002).

fieldwork and on other occasions expressed rather diverse views on their lives in the USSR and often drew a distinction between the role of the state, socialist ideals and the ordinary life of its citizens. These findings are also supported by Friedberg's study of Odessa's 1970s émigrés (in the USA, Germany and Israel): despite the fact that many Jewish Odessans had experienced discrimination, the majority of his informants "spoke of their native town with surprising warmth, affection, and considerable nostalgia" (Friedberg 1991:1; see also Markowitz 1993). This can possibly be explained by the fact that Jews in Odessa and elsewhere did not necessarily analyze their lives solely through their experiences of being Jewish but, rather, through an array of positions that they assumed in their personal and professional life.⁶⁹ Moreover, as Kotkin notes, many Soviet inhabitants recognized the righteousness of socialist values even if they did not see them actually applied in state practices (1995:228).

Conclusion

While my research is not about history per se, it is virtually impossible to explore questions of identity without encountering invocations of the past. Certainly my informants felt that it was appropriate to elaborate on historical themes in their accounts.⁷⁰ One's claim to being a *korenoi Odessit* (native of Odessa) or a *nastoyashi Odessit* (real Odessan) is strongly bound up with one's connection to Odessa's locale and its history.

⁶⁹ One's career, for instance, served as a great marker of identity during Soviet times. As Kotkin points out, "because the practice of identifying individuals through their work history was so integral, it could be seen in almost any official document" (1995:216).

⁷⁰ When defining themselves as Odessan locals, those who are second-, third- or even fourth-generation Odessans, would proudly add their generational depth. However, One can be a *nastoyashi* (real) *Odessit* without being born there. Locals often used the term "real" to compliment long-term visitors and non-native residents who exhibit qualities of an Odessan attitude to life, know and appreciate the city's social and historical settings, and enjoy Odessan cuisine, humor etc. Toward the end of my stay, when my friends sensed my attachment to Odessa by the way I would describe the city to others or discuss it in their presence, or heard me using Odessan expressions, or bargain for goods, they would refer to me, at times half jokingly, as a real *Odessitka*.

The history of Jews in Odessa, during the times of the Tsars and the Soviets alike, alternates periods of Jewish economic and social success with times of hostility, discrimination and horror. The status and location of Odessa have opened the city, and its Jewish population, to internal and external pressures associated with its multi-ethnic composition and the commercial activity related to the port. These are some of the reasons why many historians treat Odessa as a “unique” place with distinctive social practices that have produced its own range of liberal identities among Jews and others.⁷¹

Odessa’s Jews experienced a dynamic process of modernization and transformation of their population in the late 18th and 19th centuries, which many, albeit not all, saw as an essential part of their personal and group development. The subsequent historical events of the 20th century revealed many of the limitations of Jewish assimilation and exposed Odessa’s Jewry to a degree of violence and brutality. Nonetheless, 20th-century Jewish Odessa engaged in a continual effort of integration, supported by many secularized and already assimilated Jews. This brief review of their history thus offers some insight into the processes by which Odessan Jews altered their practices and beliefs to gain the benefits of survival, Jewish enlightenment, a higher place on the socioeconomic ladder, or acted out of sheer necessity or in support of Soviet ideology. The early changes in turn framed the later developments of Soviet rule, when Jews learned new ways to act out their secular Jewishness (by means of education and professional achievement) or, at times, chose to bypass their Jewish identification altogether and strived for other meaningful titles to represent their status in Odessan society or abroad.

Today, Odessa is no longer Soviet, still relatively Russian, barely Jewish, and increasingly Ukrainian. The history of Odessa’s Jewish life as described in this and the

⁷¹ Odessa was not the only place where Jewish life differed from the more central areas of the country. Georgian and Bukharan Jews were also somewhat less subject to government pressure, and in their case were able to maintain the integrity of their local life more than the Jews of Russia and Eastern Ukraine (Krupnick 1994:141; see also Cooper 1998).

following chapters helps to place the present-day social, cultural, political and economic environs of Odessa and the practices, attitudes and beliefs of its population (specifically, but not exclusively, the Jews) in the larger context of the developments affecting the city over time. The historical background presented in this chapter also contextualizes the current local challenges that the generations of ex-Soviet Jews face today.

The character of today's Jewish population has undoubtedly been shaped by the lived history of their predecessors, just as it is being reshaped by the outlook of Odessa's young people and the presence of translocal persons and practices, which today penetrate the city's social and geographical space and compete for recognition. Odessa's Jews are being addressed by a host of foreign Jewish representatives (mostly American and Israeli Jews) who, in the name of re-creating a lost heritage of culture and history, have emerged as new voices of authority on the nature of being a Jew the and authenticity of Jewish practices. In common with other post-Soviet regions today Odessa is experiencing a struggle of representation in which cultural and religious revival is a central theme. Some sense of history and place – and what has been presented here is far from complete – is vital if one is to ask the questions of what was lost and what is being re-created, and what other social elements are abandoned, in the context of the continuities and ruptures visible across Odessa's past (Richardson 2004:42).

Chapter 2

Remembering the Past / Making Sense of the Present: Narratives of Elderly Odessan Jews

Introduction

I was first introduced to Olga Notkina and Victor Feldman by Margarita, an extremely energetic 82-year-old professor of philosophy who was eager that I should encounter the type of Jewish Odessans I would not otherwise “meet on the street.” Describing her friends as members of the dwindling local intelligentsia, Margarita emphasized how important it was for me to get a sense of the type of Jewishness that Victor and Olga represented, formed in the early Soviet era yet far from simplistically hostile to that past, defiantly atheist or agnostic yet Jewish in a distinctive way. It was not merely that meeting them would give me a more nuanced understanding of the tensions of the Soviet era. It was also about the relationship of old to new Jews in Odessa. Margarita felt the days of the “Odessan Jewish intelligentsia” were numbered, partly due to emigration, the post-Soviet changes in the city and the new concepts of Jewish identification now present in Odessa.

It was not only Margarita who made me think about the possibly disappearing elements of Odessa’s Soviet Jewishness, as represented by elderly Jews like those who appear in this chapter. In some instances the intelligentsia values of the elder generations were fully transmitted to, and upheld by, their children and grandchildren. However, in many cases, today’s middle-aged Jews constituted a generational link between very different values and ways of being Jewish. Frequently their own children had departed from the orientation of their grandparents or enriched their secular intelligentsia values with new orientations and patterns of behavior. Among other things, this chapter thus opens a dialogue between Odessa’s different generations and classes of Jews, which the rest of the thesis further explores.

Encountering the past in the present

Olga and Victor's apartment, which they referred to as a small *golubyatnik* (bird house), contrasted with the large wooden penthouse doors and neatly tiled hallways of the other apartments in their building. Inside, there was no door to the toilet; instead, a flowery piece of cloth provided some privacy from the miniature kitchen, which also served as a hallway. The couple's bedroom was filled with books spilling over the dilapidated wooden shelves that leaned against the faded wallpapered walls. By the front door stood a large stack of city newspapers awaiting disposal, with a number of Jewish newspapers (printed in Russian) at the top of the pile. Their apartment did not have any obvious Jewish paraphernalia such as a *mezuzah*,⁷² a *menorah*,⁷³ Jewish scripture, or other "telling" elements of a Jewish home. Nor did their apartment overtly signal their elite social status in the city, which Margarita had spoken about so highly.

Olga was 82 when I met her. She passed away shortly after I left the field in March 2007. A small-framed, fragile woman with shining light-blue eyes, she was always neatly dressed even for her often home-bound routine. Victor, seven years older than his wife, was a slender elderly man with a full head of gray hair and thick black glasses, which he always wore sloping to the right side of his face. With the help of his cane, he was able to maneuver within their house but not beyond. Although they were well into their retirement when we met, Olga continued to attend at least two cultural events a month (usually book signings and meetings with various authors) organized by the Odessa Literature Museum, keeping Victor up to date on the city's affairs and herself in a routine of "seeing and being seen." For the last ten years before her death, Olga, at times with Victor's assistance, had also worked as a volunteer at Gmilus Hesed, a club for elderly Jews, giving lectures on the history of her native city.

⁷² A piece of parchment in a decorative case that is fixed outside the front door of many Jewish homes.

⁷³ A nine-branched candelabrum.

Both historians by education, they had first met at the library of Odessa University where they spent over 50 years working as specialists in various collections. They had both published extensively in Russian on various historical themes and in 2006 they released their last book, titled *Vmeste s Nimi* (Together with them), dedicated to and about their colleagues at the library, “whose memory,” as they wrote in the introduction, “they had to keep alive.” Both of them were proud that they were still able to tap into their knowledge of literature and history or, in their words, “turn on their brain,” in occasional conversations with the city’s circle of intelligentsia, who would visit them with various enquiries about Odessa’s past. “We are standing on the edge of a cliff,” Olga would tell me. “As soon as we are not able to answer a single question asked of us, we are gone.”

As we sat around their dining room table, Victor and Olga passionately shared with me the history of Odessa, all the while cross referencing their published friends whose books they occasionally pulled out as they contested each other’s claims about the city’s various “golden eras.” At times they would turn to local politics, debating Ukraine’s growing nationalism – which they both regarded as “fake” in its content and invasive and forced in its appearance. In similar tone, they spoke of the city’s current Jewish religious communities, whose leaders they regarded as just as untrustworthy as the politicians of the newly independent state, Ukraine.

Olga would always allow Victor to start our discussion, waiting either until she thought he needed to be corrected or until I directed my question specifically to her.⁷⁴ She said little about personal matters (like the Soviet women of her generation described by Fitzpatrick and Slezkine (2000) who chose to speak mainly about the public matters of their time). Together, Victor and Olga talked me through many of their lived experiences in Odessa, a city they both loved and saw as pivotal in defining themselves as people. Their life stories constituted a historical marathon that was truly rare to

⁷⁴ Because Victor was difficult to interrupt and Olga respected his role as the “talker of the family,” Victor’s life story dominates in length.

find among the “stay back” Jewish population of the city. Many in their cohort did not survive WWII; others had died of old age either in Odessa or various countries of emigration.⁷⁵

I spent over a year getting to know them. Usually I would visit their house to conduct interviews but occasionally I would accompany Olga on her day’s errands, helping her with her tasks, which made a different setting for our conversations. Through their life histories, and stories of others, my research tries to illustrate the various ways that elderly Jews in Odessa remember and reflect on their social status in the Soviet Union and make sense of their lives today. Moreover, their combined narratives allow for a deeper understanding of Jewish life in the Soviet Union, while contextualizing what some scholars have portrayed as the “negative Jewish identity” in the Soviet period, oriented by Soviet-led discrimination and anti-Semitism (see for example Wiesel 1966; Gitelman 2001[1988]).⁷⁶ On a more intimate level, this chapter examines how Jewishness was expressed and discussed in the Soviet days and the ways it was passed down in private settings of families.

For the most part, all of the informants included here are secular Jews who defined themselves as members of the Russian-speaking intelligentsia and who were educated and raised in the “Soviet house of culture” (Grant 1995).⁷⁷ They grew up in families

⁷⁵ Victor (89) and Olga (82) were my eldest informants. Other elderly Jews interviewed and featured throughout the thesis had either experienced WWII as children (mostly evacuated from the city to the countryside and Central Asia) or had moved to the city after the War. Given the fact that 80 percent of those Jews who remained in Odessa during the Nazi invasion were annihilated (see Chapter 1) and many of the survivors have since passed away from old age, few are left to tell of their experiences of the Holocaust. See Chapter 5 for a consideration of local Holocaust memories.

⁷⁶ For Ritterband, it was precisely the hostile atmosphere of the Soviet Union that intensified the sense of a Jewish self for many of the Soviet Jews (1997:332)

⁷⁷ While the majority of Odessa’s elderly Jews whom I met were members of the local intelligentsia, not all of them fell into this social class. Moreover, the status of “intelligentsia” and self-identification as *intelligent* or *inteligentka* (Russian terms for male and female members of the intelligentsia respectively) have become debated descriptions. The lack of a more diversified sample of elderly Jews can possibly be explained by the fact that most of my research was conducted in the city center and not on the outskirts of Odessa where I could possibly have drawn a different sample. Equally my “snowballing” method among people I found through friends and colleagues affiliated with various cultural and academic institutions may have contributed to determining the sample.

where relics of religious practice were remembered and at times partially observed but not sought after, for various reasons.⁷⁸ The stories revealed are individual trajectories but ones whose themes I found representative of many other elderly Jews I met in Odessa.

Through the life histories presented here, I try to place the historical and present-day events and experiences of now ex-Soviet Jewry in a more descriptive and multidimensional everyday reality. More importantly, this and the previous chapter highlight some of the specifically Odessan Jewish traits that my informants fear may disappear, or be replaced with new orientations or come to be referred to as part of an ambivalently treasured past.

In following the local discourse and practices of elderly Jews, I argue that Jewish belonging in the context of post-Soviet Odessa cannot be analyzed by any one single measure of Jewish tradition, including Soviet-era discrimination. Such simplistic views need to be confronted with the divergent outlooks that Soviet Jews actually expressed about their status in the USSR. The accounts here thus broadly support the analyses offered by Slezkine (2004); Yurchak (2006); Kotkin (1995); Humphrey (2004); Steinberg and Wanner (2008), discussed in Chapter 1.

Victor Feldman

The early years

Victor is a fourth-generation *Odessit*. He was born and raised in what he described as a “very Jewish house” next to the Odessa Jewish Burial Society in a “typical Odessan courtyard” inhabited by people of different nationalities.

⁷⁸ I was told of certain cases where Jewish families continued to observe religious practices throughout the period of Soviet rule, although I myself never met anyone of such caliber in Odessa despite my ongoing efforts, possibly because such persons and families – haunted by feelings of repression or persecution – had emigrated or passed away. Suffice it to say that reflections of these individuals would speak of yet another reality of Odessa’s Soviet Jewish life.

Victor was born in 1917, a year remembered for the Bolshevik Revolution that brought the Soviet regime to power. His family had first settled in Odessa in the early 1800s when his paternal great-grandfather Shimon, a blacksmith by trade, walked to Odessa from Olgiensk (a town on the border of Ukraine and Belarus) with nothing but “a small sack and a pair of boots on his shoulder.” Historically, Odessa, a developing port city, attracted Jews among other migrants with its growing labor market and economic opportunities. Victor, however, suspected that Shimon had originally relocated to Odessa to escape some troubles in his home town. His mother’s family moved to Odessa from the Bryansk region of central Ukraine in the early 1900s.

Victor’s father, also named Shimon, an optician by training, worked in a pharmaceutical company, UROTAT, which was responsible for the distribution of medicine and medical supplies throughout southern Russia. His mother, Rahel Gendler, was a physician. Partially educated in Switzerland, she spoke fluent German. In 1911, shortly after Victor’s parents met, his father was arrested and imprisoned for participation in an unauthorized meeting of social-democrats. Following his trial hearing, he was sentenced to a two-year deportation to the coast of the White Sea. Seeking to accompany her husband, Rahel wrote a letter to the governor of Odessa, requesting permission for an official marriage on the prison premises. In the presence of a rabbi, they were married in a Jewish religious ceremony and thereafter spent the first two years of their married life in the Vologotskaya Oblast.

It was there that his mother launched her career in medicine, working as a local doctor, which she then continued in Odessa after their return in 1913.⁷⁹ Working in Moldovanka, one of Odessa’s poorest neighborhoods, she held the position of *vrach dlya bednyh* (doctor for the needy), attending to those residents of the city who could not afford medical care on their own.

⁷⁹ That was the year, as Victor put it, that the Romanov family celebrated their 30 years in power by granting amnesty to many of the deported “criminals,” allowing them to return home.

As an only child, Victor was partly raised by his paternal grandmother. She took care of him during his mother's long working hours, especially after his father's sudden death in 1922. Mother of ten children (half of whom died of epidemics), with a full figure to show for her loyalty to having a big Jewish family, "*babka* [grandma] Feldman" was an observant religious woman "from a good family." As Victor recalled, "Catching me in the courtyard, she used to drag me into the synagogue, which I tried to avoid at all costs." His grandfather, Pavel, was a *magazinchik* (shopkeeper) who looked after the production, delivery and sale of grain. In Victor's words, he was a *iudei* (Russian for a religious Jew) but one who lived a "tailored observant life."

My grandmother used to scream at him, "You are not a Jew, you are a *goy*,"⁸⁰ as he would heat up a little piece of *salo* [pig's fat, a traditional Ukrainian delicacy] and dip his bread into the melted greasy puddle. He would shout back even louder, "I am a working man and I need to eat. God would not get mad at me for a little piece of *salo*."

According to Victor, his grandfather was far from an exception among the Jews in Odessa, who, he claimed, transgressed Jewish dietary laws on a regular basis. The culturally diverse and delicious food sold at Privoz, Odessa's famous market, often lured Jews to eat non-kosher items easily accessible to all, according to Victor.

His grandfather frequently attended the synagogue but, as Victor recalled, he treated it as a social gathering to discuss social affairs rather than a holy house of worship. In his words, "He used to call the workers at the synagogue *Gud Ganoven* [Yiddish: God's thieves] because, in his eyes, they did not work for their bread." Despite all the frustration of her husband's work ethic infringing on Jewish traditions, Victor's grandmother, as he explained, was always proud of him, and bragging to her friends about his honest earnings.

From what he remembers growing up Victor's parents were not observant of *kashrut* (dietary laws), *Shabbat* or daily prayer. Nor did they dress in the traditional Jewish

⁸⁰ Derogatory name for a non-Jew.

attire common among his grandparents' generation. They were both "revolutionaries in support of liberating reforms in their country." At home and in their professional lives they always spoke Russian. As Victor commented, "I could understand Yiddish because of my grandfather but I never spoke it. My exposure to Hebrew was also minimal as I never attended a *heder* [religious school for boys] and it was not a language of conversation in any of my circles of friends." While Victor acknowledged that his parents did not build their life around canons of religion, he made it clear that they kept to some traditions – perhaps mostly to please the elderly. His father, as also his grandfather, had a reserved seat at the synagogue but, from what he was told, he rarely attended prayer.

Some rituals, however, remained family traditions even if, for some family members, they were hollowed out of any religious belief. Acknowledging the theatrical nature of the event, Victor described his fading memory of celebrating the Jewish holiday of *Pesah* (Passover):

While my grandmother was alive, we would always celebrate *Pesah*. For her, my mother would clean the house from yeast products, buy *matzah* [unleavened bread] and cook her favorite Jewish dishes for our *Seder* [ritual festival meal]. My grandmother would invite the whole family and ask my uncle to say the blessing over the wine as she sat there graciously looking over our table. After her death I don't remember celebrating anything.

"Darwin and Pasteur were more of Gods to my mother's generation than anyone else"

Victor had a secular education at a Russian-speaking gymnasium in Odessa rather than the traditional Jewish education experienced by his father and grandfather. In the year that Victor started primary school, Soviet national policy was focused on raising national awareness among the country's minorities. For Jews, this led to the birth of secular Yiddish education, which was supported and encouraged throughout the Soviet Union. In her account of Soviet Jewish schools, Shternshis argues that, from the perspective of the Soviet government:

Yiddish-language schools were designed to become an effective alternative to traditional religious-based education and to raise a generation of devoted Soviet citizens ... The specifically Jewish element in the curriculum was used simply as a tool to convert the Yiddish-speaking population into a Soviet-thinking one. (2006:17)

Yet he did not attend such a school. "Soviet policies were similar to an attack of malaria," as Victor put it, "one day extreme, the next day gone." As he recalled:

In 1924, during one of these "malaria attacks," which lasted for a couple of years, the government was dedicated to giving each nationality their own educational curriculum taught in their national language [which, for the Jews of the USSR, was officially Yiddish]. Thus, across the country we had Jewish, Ukrainian, Polish, Georgian and other national schools as a public display of the "internationalization" proclaimed in the Soviet Union.

Victor remembered how local city authorities in Odessa once came to their house asking his mother why her son was not attending the local Jewish school – to which she answered, "I see no future in him applying himself in Yiddish. He lives in Russia, and I want him to be educated in Russian." As Gitelman (1972) points out, the Jewish schools of the early Socialist state failed mainly because parents thought of Russian culture as superior to their own and wanted their children to avoid the stigma of speaking Yiddish-accented Russian (cited in Markowitz 1993:19). Shternshis also notes that "Jewish parents often preferred Russian schools because they felt that such an education would give children more opportunities in the future" (2006:16).

The key point, as Victor emphasized to me, was that education was at the core of Jewish values. "Education was always a necessity in my family but religious subjects were viewed as backward and not in any manner progressive." In his day, he explained, only *mistekhovye* (Jews from small *shtetls*)⁸¹ still wanted to educate their children in *heders*.⁸² "Jews who were in my circle of friends strived to receive

⁸¹ This adjective is also used colloquially to describe someone who is backward in their ways and thinking.

⁸² Shternshis documents that, by the mid 1930s many Jewish children did not even know what the word *heder* meant (2006:16).

education in one of the city's gymnasiums and apply their knowledge in universities, military academies and music conservatories ... This was the case for Odessa."

Victor's mother was fascinated with scientific theory and regarded religion as "simply silly." As Victor described:

She was of a different generation [from her parents], interested in Pavlov and the theory of relativity ... Even if at times in a primitive manner, they [people of his mother's generation] tried to explain everything around them ... In any case, Darwin and Pasteur were more of a God to them than anyone else.

Like his mother, Victor's interests and affiliations went far beyond a traditional Jewish life – or, rather, his Jewish life had come to include new aspects of identification with the growing Russian-speaking intelligentsia. Studying many secular disciplines at school, he chose to major in history at Odessa University. While he was a student, he joined the Communist youth league, Komsomol, which he regarded at that time as a great honor.

"From an early school age, I was told that there is no God and all religious leaders are crooks"

In the second or third year of his university studies, Victor explained, it was decided by the faculty board of the history department that future Soviet educators had to be preachers of atheism. Shaking his head to show his distress, Victor recalled:

They sent us a young man who started giving us lectures on the harmful nature of religion. At first, we listened – but we were already historians – so when we realized that, to him, Pontius Pilate and Rameses, if not relatives [of each other] were close friends, we just stopped paying attention. And then I started thinking, exactly what is it that I don't believe in?

Victor's curiosity drove him to commit a "terrible crime" for which, he explained, he could easily have been expelled from the Komsomol:

I found a Bible, some Evangelical literature, a Koran in Russian translation, and a Jewish encyclopedia ... I spent close to a month familiarizing myself with my so-called evil. I must say that I did not

become religious ... I was left with the impression that these were collections of some better, some worse stories about cosmology and human morals ... told by different people around the world, none of which I found close to my nature or explanatory of the world as I envisioned it at the time.

Victor made it very clear that, although his own close environment was clearly one of secular Jewish identification, the city's Jewry as a whole did not abandon religion overnight. Speaking of his college years, Victor recalled that some religious rituals remained in place despite the atheist reforms:

I remember when, in the early 1930s they started closing all the synagogues and churches in the city, no one protested ... yet at the same time, everyone insisted that the deceased were still buried in their separate [Christian, Jewish, Armenian, Tatar, Karaim] cemeteries and according to their traditions. This was the practice all the way until the War.

The War

At the age of 24, leaving his young wife, a Jewish woman named Valentina and their newborn son, Senya, Victor was drafted into the army for the Great Patriotic War. His experiences of the Nazi invasion were summarized by his stories of being a soldier and fighting with the Soviet army. Recalling this time, he concentrated on the horror of losing close friends "whose young bodies absorbed Nazi-fired bullets in inhumane acts difficult for anyone to imagine." Like other Soviet veterans, he spoke of Soviet victory and, with great pride, told me that many of the officers who served in the War – including his two first cousins who earned honorary medals – were Jewish.⁸³ Victor's story stands against Soviet anti-Semitic propaganda popularized after the War that portrayed Jews as cowards.

Victor also emphasized the tragedy of war, dwelling on the astonishing number of Soviet casualties and the lack of regard for human life shown by Soviet leaders. "In the

⁸³ See Leykin (2007) who depicts narratives of achievement, pride and victory still nurtured by Soviet war veterans in Israel.

Soviet Union, *Rodina* [homeland] was spelled with a capital "R" but *chelovek* [person] was spelled with a small letter."

Because of his impaired eyesight, Victor was demobilized one year into his military service. Receiving his release papers, he was able to locate his family, who had been living in Adgar (Azerbaijan) since the evacuation of Odessa.

In 1945, after the Soviet liberation of Ukraine, and also the death of his wife, Victor and his remaining family returned to Odessa. Victor managed to get a work placement at the private collection of Count Voronzov, located at the public library of Odessa University. At that time, one needed employment to receive coupons for bread and this job, in many ways, saved his life. It was also through this position that he met his second wife, Olga, and started his long and loyal career as a historian.

*Anti-Semitism*⁸⁴

Never acknowledging anti-Semitic acts as impinging on in his own self-identification as a Jew, Victor did recognize the role of the Soviet regime in driving anti-Jewish propaganda and also secretly persecuting those whose passports revealed their Jewish identity:

When I was a little boy, there were some elements of anti-Semitism around ... At times there were fights between boys on that exact subject but none of that played a central role in my life. It was not until the Soviet regime actively supported anti-Semitic policies that we really experienced what that word meant. It was not systematic, rather quite hidden behind the façade of Soviet *druzhba narodov* [friendship of nations]. At first we were all equals and then, in the late 1930s and even more so after the War, it became impossible for a Jew to be admitted to

⁸⁴ My informants emphasized that it is important to distinguish Soviet anti-Semitism and Nazi anti-Semitism. Soviet anti-Semitism was described as state-sponsored discrimination against members of the Jewish nationality, which took the form of Jewish quotas in education and employment, anti-Jewish printed propaganda, arbitrary refusal of travel and immigration visas, unjust arrests and executions. Anti-Semitic policies appeared in the USSR in the late 1930s and more fiercely after WWII. Nazi anti-Semitism, according to my informants, was directed against anyone of Jewish descent and was expressed in arbitrary acts of brutality, destruction and mass extermination of Jews during the actual events of WWII.

any prestigious education institution, which all had quotas. You had to really prove yourself.

However, as he tells it, Odessa was still more liberal and tolerant than other cities in the Soviet Union:

The city always had a rather large percentage of Jews who were visible in every layer of society ... They lived and worked among other nationalities, speaking one language [Russian]. My courtyard, for instance, was phenomenally international: one of the boys, Pavel Gau, was German, another boy was Greek, Borya Hadjim was a Karaïm and there were others. This living situation was very typical of Odessa where there was never a segregated Jewish quarter.

Discussing anti-Semitism at the political level, Victor explained to me at length that the man standing at the top of the Soviet Union (Stalin) in fact did not believe in anything (in the religious sense). He was not an anti-Semite, rather, a politician who:

similar to Lenin, was a man without principle acting out of his own interests and following one rule, divide and rule ... And during that time in history [late 1930s], he realized, while keeping his finger on the pulse of the nation, that there was some turmoil in the country and someone had to be blamed... so it was in his interest to find the guilty ... Hence he blamed the Jews, the intelligentsia, the all knowing ... Believe me, Jews were not the only ones who suffered from his brutality.

As with his earlier “malaria” image, Victor again stressed that the Soviet regime acted toward Jews in rather contradictory ways, “one day bringing them in and the next separating them from the Soviet collective.”

In effect, Victor was saying that Jews were persecuted not necessarily because they were Jews but because they belonged to a wider group of people whose loyalties, in the view of the Soviet leaders, were questionable, and when scapegoats were politically expedient. At the same time, he was always careful to distinguish the feeling of the Soviet Union in general and his experiences growing up in somewhat more liberal Odessa.

Olga Notkina

Adding to our discussion on anti-Semitism, Olga described some incidents from the time when she and her mother had been evacuated to a small town in Northern Kavkaz during the occupation of Odessa. Sometimes these rural people, driven by “fear,” would not open their doors to Jews or, driven by “ignorance,” regarded Jews as barbarians. She described a conversation with the woman they were staying with:

There were hardly any Jews there, we were living with a woman who one day asked me, “Jews, Jews, who are these Jews people keep talking about, have you ever seen one?” “Yes,” I said, “I have. They are just ordinary people ... for instance, if someone asked you who you are, what would you say?” I asked her. “A Russian,” she answered. “Well they would just say a Jew.” “Thank you,” she said to me “for your clear explanation, I thought they were some kind of *poluzveri* [half animal, half human creature].”⁸⁵

For Olga, the fact that Odessa’s general population had long been exposed to Jews and Jewish practices freed the city from susceptibility to the kind of propaganda that relied on ignorance and mythology.

Olga was born in 1923 in Odessa. Third-generation *Odessitka*, she was raised in an atheist Russian Jewish family. Her father, Yehuda Notkin, worked as an engineer, while her mother, Polina Dreisden, taught literature in one of the local city schools. They were both supporters of the Revolution and the Soviet regime that followed. Although her grandparents’ generation was observant, her parents, similar to Victor’s, did not follow the rules of the *halakhah*. “They were open about their Jewishness, but I do not remember them practicing religion,” Olga explained.

Graduating from a Russian-speaking girls’ gymnasium (higher secondary level college), Olga began her studies at the history department of Odessa University, where she was enrolled until the beginning of the War.

⁸⁵ Much Soviet propaganda portrayed Jews as animal-like creatures with horns and other animal features such as a tail. See Gitelman (2001[1988]:218).

Much of Olga's story echoed the themes of Victor's account. Her parents also regarded their secular orientation and Russian education as a new benchmark of social achievement that figured against the backdrop of the family's earlier system of religious practices and beliefs. This same mix of values was passed on to Olga from an early age and she too grew up surrounded by the Russian language and its rich world of books. At the same time, being a Jew was a proud fact for Olga's parents, which she also internalized as a child. Following in her parent's footsteps, she connected her Jewishness with communist beliefs. In her school years, she joined Komsomol where, like Victor, she found a number of like-minded friends and, later, colleagues. Olga's passion for history and books was possibly one of the reasons she and Victor came to share their lives. They did not have any children but treated Senya, Victor's only son from his previous marriage, as part of their family and greatly valued his regular visits and conversation.

When I met Senya, a scientist in his mid-sixties, at Victor and Olga's apartment, he expressed a similar orientation to his father and Olga, defining himself as Jewish by the parameters of his education, worldly views and career, which aligned him with other members of the intelligentsia. Nonetheless, he expressed an open curiosity about religious celebrations, drawing my attention to the elaborate rituals, feasts and beauty that he had only seen from afar. Neither Senya nor his family participated in any Jewish activities in the city although, from what I could gather, Senya did not object to the development of Jewish institutions to the degree that his father and Olga did. Senya's immediate family all live in Odessa, although some members of his distant kin have relocated to the United States. For Victor and Olga themselves, leaving Odessa was never a question.

"It is hard to believe we live in the same Odessa"

One of the subjects that Victor and Olga talked about at length was the changing state of Odessa. In discussing change, they focused on the process of Ukrainization – which they saw as slowly "poisoning" their city – and, specifically within the Jewish realm, the

activity of Jewish religious organizations that had recently moved to Odessa. They felt that today's Jewish religious leaders were moving the local Jewish population toward a religiously oriented Jewish identity and history based on values and processes foreign to their world (attending and making donations to the synagogue, observing Jewish traditions and rituals, the importance of marrying a Jewish spouse, learning Hebrew, receiving religious education, disaffiliation from Soviet secular holidays etc.). Jews in Odessa, Victor and Olga argued, were much closer to Russian culture, which was "the language that they spoke, the books that they read, the theater they attended, the food they ate, the clothes they wore, and on the whole, their philosophy of life or *mentalitet* [mentality]." Rapaport and Lomsky-Feder's informants in Israel regarded their attachment to Russian culture and their affiliation with the intelligentsia as key components in the self identity of Jews from the FSU (2002:236).

At the same time, neither Victor nor Olga would argue that they or other Jews in the city, in the process of adopting Russian culture had ceased to be Jews or became purely Russian. Rather, their identification was with being Russian *and* Jewish, categories that (albeit legally exclusive categories in the Soviet Union) were combined in their identification with being Russian Jews and specifically being part of the larger social class of Russian speaking intelligentsia. In this group they included, "highly educated and cultured professionals such as teachers, professors, artists, doctors, engineers, architects and other white collar professionals."⁸⁶ This ideal of belonging to the "intelligentsia," Rapaport and Lomsky-Feder argue, is central to the construction of the ethnic identity of Russian Jews and is a "prism through which Jews consider and evaluate both themselves and others" (2002:233). Members of the intelligentsia were also classified by many of my informants as "cosmopolitan," whose circle of friends included different nationalities and not necessarily just Jews. Among such collectives, they argued, relationships were based purely on personal interests and not one's

⁸⁶ For theoretical, historical and empirical discussion of the concept of "intelligentsia," see Malia (1960); Gessen (1997); Markowitz (1993:125–136); Patico (2005:484, 486); Lissak and Leshem (1995:20–36).

loyalty to a specific religious or national group. As far as Victor and Olga were concerned, the new Jewish religious leaders in the city were seeking to undermine this Odessan accomplishment by speaking and acting against assimilation. Victor and Olga were also skeptical of those younger Jews who had recently become religious and questioned their motivations for seeking Jewish affiliation.

Friendships formed in Soviet times, they emphasized, carried moral weight because they were valued for their own sake and not driven by economic motives, unlike today.⁸⁷ “We were friends because we enjoyed each other’s company. Today it is much more about what someone can do for you or you can do for them. Why do you really think people belong to those Jewish organizations?” Yet, while questioning groups based on ethnoreligious solidarity, they themselves were affiliated with the Gmilus Hesed club for elderly Jews, mentioned earlier. When I raised this point, Victor and Olga explained that to them the organization served as a social platform for discussing and commemorating Odessa’s history in general. They made a distinction between participants, like themselves, who sought communication and dialogue with other Odessans and those who used Jewish networks to receive economic benefits. In my opinion, many affiliated Jews actually amalgamated both these aspects and enjoyed these and other benefits discussed in later chapters.

However, Victor and Olga adamantly rejected the claim of contemporary Jewish activists to be restoring the lost or, rather, stolen treasures of Jewish life in Odessa. Rather, they described the earlier processes of assimilation and Russification in Odessa as a “natural process of *razvitie* [cultural development]” and viewed those who adopted them as *razvitimi* (culturally developed). In contrast to the image of suppressed subjects of Soviet regime, my informants claimed that Jews of their generation voluntarily and enthusiastically accepted processes of Russification and assimilation and viewed them as a way “forward” in reaching greater opportunities in

⁸⁷ See Patino (2005:484) where she describes the role money, as opposed to social contacts, had come to play in everyday needs of Saint Petersburg residents in the late 1990s.

education, professionalism, and self development. Although they acknowledged the role of state authorities in perpetuating these processes, in their opinion, this fact was secondary to the self chosen path of the greater Jewish population. Specifically addressing their home environs, they claimed that Odessa's distinct history played a significant role in the speed and absorption of Russian language and culture among its Jewish and non-Jewish contingent.

While Odessa's particularities created a distinctive cultural setting conducive to assimilation, my informants equally spoke of Russian culture as on the whole much "richer" than Jewish culture or "local" Ukrainian literature and thus more attractive and desired among the greater population.⁸⁸ As Olga put it:

Of course, we realized that Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky were three heads taller [much more talented] than Sholem Aleichem [the famous Ukrainian Yiddish writer whose tales of Jewish village life became the basis of the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*] ... In my 50 years of working at the library, no one came to re read Sholem Aleichem or [Nobel prize winner] Mikhail Sholokhov's *And Quiet Flows the Don*. But they came to re read Lev Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* and *War and Peace*.

It is important to stress that for that generation, and indeed until quite recently, the world of Russian literature was also more readily available than Jewish and to some degree Ukrainian writings; it was less restricted, not to mention actively popularized throughout different periods of Soviet rule. Surely, many would argue that the state promoted the Russian language and Russian literature as part of their civilizing and modernizing projects which, following the 1930's, acted suspiciously towards, and later banned, much of the "national" literature.⁸⁹ Victor and Olga did not deny this reality

⁸⁸ Gitelman also notes that most Jews in Ukraine look upon Russian culture as a "higher" and "less provincial" or less "peasant" than Ukrainian culture (1988:441).

⁸⁹ Terry Martin describes the Soviet resolutions passed in 1937, which "made the Russian language a mandatory subject in all schools, liquidated national districts and village soviets, liquidated all non-Russian schools in the Russian regions of the USSR, and increased the number of Russian newspapers in Ukraine". He notes that the Russian language was promoted as "public propaganda" in a series of newspaper articles, one of which reads "The great and mighty Russian language, the language of Lenin and Stalin, Pushkin and Gorky, Tolstoi and Belinskii, is profoundly dear to all citizens of the USSR, and is studied with love by children and adults ... [which shows] the exclusive interest of all nationalities to the

when I brought up these facts during one of our interviews with a colleague from the Museum of Odessa's Jews but they nonetheless insisted that Jews (and others of the intelligentsia background) would have, in any case, chosen works produced by Russian authors.⁹⁰

"People always say Odessa was a very Jewish city but it was a Russian-Jewish city,"

Victor exclaimed:

Although Odessa served as a center of Zionism it was also a center of *Haskalah* and assimilation followed on all fronts. These processes were not mutually exclusive ... I remember there was a family in my courtyard, we called them Palestephines [lovers of Palestine], their daughter Nusia used to drag us to different Zionist clubs she organized around the city...They were very active Jews in support of the Jewish homeland but at home they still spoke Russian ... Take Vladimir Jabotinsky, for instance. He was one of the leading organizers of Zionism, not just in Odessa but a Jewish activist known to the world ... Yet his novel *The Five*, which describes his life in Odessa, he wrote in Russian, not Hebrew or Yiddish.

As Victor explained, Odessan Jews of his and earlier generations lived in a Russified environment and thus the Russian language and Russian culture naturally came into their lives. "Prior to the Revolution all Jewish boys of course went to a *heder* and were taught Hebrew but the same families went to Russian theaters, cursed in Russian, and drank vodka in Russian style." Victor stressed that Jews, like other minorities in the city, simply adapted to their environment, learning Russian first for the purpose of employment and later education and overall communication with the larger society. "It is not that we became Russian because we spoke and read Russian, rather we became Russian Jews and with time Russian culture became dominant in circles of the

study of the language of the great Russian people, first among equals in the fraternity family of the peoples of the USSR". As a result of this rhetoric, "Ukrainian nationalists were once again accused of attempts to 'divorce Ukrainian culture from fraternal Russian culture and orient the Ukrainian people on the capitalist west, on fascist Germany'" (2001:428).

⁹⁰ Other distinctions made between Russians and Ukrainians were stronger in nature. To Victor and Olga, and others of their generation, Ukrainians (not Russians) were often depicted as Nazi collaborators (especially in Western Ukraine) and Ukrainians were regarded as being more anti-Semitic than their Russian neighbors.

intelligentsia, absorbing everything else. Among my friends Yiddish was simply considered a dialect.”

As seen in the quote above, in discussing Odessa’s prominent Jewish Zionist leader Vladimir Jabotinsky and the family of Zionist supporters in his courtyard, Victor braided together the two seemingly disparate developments of Jewish nationalism/Zionism and assimilation by stressing the role of the Russian language not only among his circle of intelligentsia but also in circles of “active” Jewish nationalists/Zionists.

In many ways, Victor’s arguments regarding Jewish acculturation also addressed our discussion of Odessa’s present-day Jewish “religious revival,” which Victor did not view as progressive. (As described above) growing up in the Soviet Union, both Victor and Olga were raised with fading elements of religion fostered by their grandparents’ generation who defined themselves, and were identified by others, as members of the Jewish faith. By contrast, Olga and Victor’s parents, while growing up in Tsarist Russia, were, as Victor put it, of a “different generation,” looking away from a traditional Jewish world toward the greater Russian-speaking and, later, Soviet society. Jewish identification, as they inherited, observed it, and came to define it, included their association with the Russian-speaking intelligentsia, their connection with being Odessan, and their past affiliation with the Soviet political movement.⁹¹ Even more than other elderly Jews I met, Victor and Olga aligned themselves with the values of the Soviet state, although they certainly recognized the shortcomings of its leaders and atrocities committed by them. As Olga shared with me:

During my entire life, I never changed my name on any of my documents, as many other Jews did in order to avoid discrimination. At the same time, I never handed in my Communist membership card after the USSR collapsed, as many rushed to do. This is all part of my life and, as they say “You can’t take words out of a song for it will lose its rhythm.” This is my story and I am extremely proud of every part of it.

⁹¹ Other scholars have pointed out that many members of the intelligentsia, unlike Victor and Olga, showed resistance toward the regime (Rapoport and Lomsky-Feder 2002:236, 240–241; Brym 1994) and were highly critical of its institutions (Markowitz 1993).

Elena Martyanova

Unlike Olga, many Jews tried not to present themselves as Jews in Soviet times in order to avoid state and grass-roots anti-Semitism. At times, however, this was not an individual choice but the result of a family decision. Such was the case for Elena.

Elena, now 65 years old, was a petite, elegant woman whose simple yet tasteful attire and light golden hair easily subtracted ten of her rarely revealed years. Unlike Victor and Olga, Elena was not born and raised in Odessa. Brought up in a secular, working class Jewish family in Kherson, a small city in southeastern Ukraine, Elena had originally moved to Odessa in 1961 to attend the local Pedagogical Institute, where she majored in linguistics. Staying with a family friend, Elena fell in love with Odessa's "warm climate, atmosphere, and people." Some ten years later, she also fell in love with Konstantin, a gentleman nine years her senior of mixed Russian and Polish descent, whom she married in a civil ceremony in 1971 and with whom she had two children, Dmitry and Victor.

Today, both of her sons have moved away from home. Her elder son, Dmitry is married to a Russian actress, Sveta, and regularly travels between Moscow and Tel Aviv. Although they are both citizens of Israel, they continue to work in Russia and visit Israel only three to four times a year. From what I gathered, Dmitry is a rather successful businessman whose lucrative profession provides for the rest of the family. The younger son, Victor, lives outside Boston, where he is finishing his PhD in biology at Dartmouth College.

My informants and dear friends Elena and Konstantin no longer live in their beloved city of Odessa. Shortly before I left the field they moved to Israel with possible plans to return in a year's time. While continuing to refer to themselves as *Odessity* (residents of Odessa) in their emails to me, they now enjoy their retirement in Netanya – a small city between Tel Aviv and Haifa – which, in their eyes, "looks and feels like a little Odessa" (possibly due to the large number of Odessa natives who reside nearby and the city's proximity to the sea).

When we met in 2006, Elena and Konstantin lived in a four room, spacious apartment across from one of the city's main parks. Their elder son Dmitry had bought this property about ten years earlier for the sole purpose of relocating his parents to a "better place." Previously, the family lived in Cheremushki, a suburb of Odessa, in a small two room apartment located in a five floor "walk-up" allocated to them by the Soviet *koperative* (cooperative). Given their combined state pension income of 800 *grivnas* (local Ukrainian currency, equivalent to £100)—, it is unlikely that they would have ever been able to afford this move without the support of their son. In their opinion, living standards today (compared to Soviet times) had improved in Odessa but definitely not for all. "Today, I don't know how people manage on just their minimal pension; look at the prices for everything nowadays," Konstantin exclaimed. "You have to have your own *delo* [business] or good children to support you. But," Elena elegantly added, "it all depends on your appetites," which, she had observed, had greatly changed in today's society.⁹²

Common to others of their generation, both of them had sustained their early choice of careers. Elena, fluent in French and proficient in English and Italian, had spent most of her professional life working as an interpreter for Intourist, a well known Soviet travel agency that accommodated foreigners on their visits to the Soviet Union and, for the few privileged Soviet citizens, organized – highly controlled – travels abroad.⁹³ Unlike many Jews in the Soviet Union, she had traveled extensively throughout Europe and parts of North Africa. The last two years before her retirement, she taught social science at the Medical Institute of Odessa, close to the Political Technical Institute where her husband taught political science and sociology for over 30 years.

In the days of the Soviet Union, Konstantin had been a member of the Communist Party, in his opinion unavoidable if he wanted to pursue a career in academia. Elena

⁹² See Patino (2005) for a discussion of post-Soviet changes in taste, consumption and values.

⁹³ It is a well known fact, which Elena herself confirmed, that Intourist always had a large presence of KGB workers employed in their various headquarters, usually accompanying incoming and departing visitors.

on the other hand, had never become a party member whose “pretty slogans” she regarded as “*vran’o* [lies].” At the same time, she told me that she understood the pragmatics of her husband’s association. As Sheila Fitzpatrick explains, party membership and education, preferably combined, were the main routes to advancement in Soviet society (1999:16).

Walking me through their apartment for the first time, Elena and Konstantin showed me pictures of their children displayed behind the sliding glass doors of their neatly stacked, ceiling high book shelves. A number of small decorative Russian Orthodox icons of Jesus (which belonged to Konstantin) leaned against hard bound collections of Russian and foreign translated classics. Small ceramic plates displayed the names of cities they had visited and liked: Jerusalem, Rome, Madrid etc. In the kitchen an old Jewish calendar, courtesy of the synagogue, displayed the month of Nissan year 5765 set against the picture of lit *Shabbat* candles. “It was a gift,” Elena commented, seeing my eyes alight on a visibly Jewish garment on their wall. Similar to Victor and Olga’s house, they did not otherwise keep any Jewish paraphernalia, although pictures of their family in Israel and other mentioned souvenirs did speak of their connection to Israel.

A difficult childhood

Behind her charm and permanent smile, Elena remembered her childhood as “dark and difficult.” Born in Starinobrad, Tajikistan, where her family had been evacuated during WWII, she knew a great deal more about her mother, Eva Ninburg, than about her father, Mendel (Mikhail) Volchanskiy. Her mother was the youngest of 12 children and born in Nikolaev (a small town northeast of Odessa) in the year 1922. Eva herself never witnessed the beautiful, wealthy and joyous life that she heard about in her sisters’ tales of “how it was back then [before the Revolution].” In 1917, her family suffered from a *krah* (crisis) in which they lost both their land and their house to the new state. That year, some members of their extended family emigrated to the United States but, for reasons unknown to Elena, her mother’s parents and their immediate

kin remained in the Russian Empire (soon to become the USSR). Their eldest son was a revolutionary. Following his calling, he had left the family to help realize the communist dream but never saw the results of it on his own doorstep. All but three of Eva's sisters, and later her father, died of famine. At an early age, Eva was placed in an orphanage where she was guaranteed a meal a day and basic care, which her mother, at that time, could not provide. Some years later, she returned to live at home. But, according to Elena, the fragmentation of her mother's family and the fact that she was partially raised in an orphanage had cut her off from Jewish family traditions, language and other elements of Jewish life previously observed by her family. Elena did not know whether her grandparents were religious. "My mom never talked about it," she said. "But she, herself, was an atheist." Like Victor and Olga, Eva defined herself as an atheist (but as a result of different factors than in the case of Victor and Olga).

Eva was able to finish only ten years of school before the beginning of WWII. This was her only official education. As Elena recalled, "She was a very smart woman; although she did not have a proper education she was wise and well read. That gave her *ponimanie, ponimanie o jizni* [understanding, understanding of life]."

During her studies in Nikolaev, Eva met her husband, Mendel (Mikhail), a young engineer of Jewish descent whom she married in a civil ceremony and with whom she had their first daughter Lilia (born in 1940) and, some five years later, Elena. In 1941, like most men in the town, Mikhail was drafted into the Soviet army to fight against the Romanian–German invasion. Suffering from a serious wound to the head, he was demobilized; as a consequence of his injury he was left paralyzed for the rest of his life. Elena regretted not having found out more about her father when she had the chance:

I get so mad at myself now for never taking the time to ask about his life. Back then, it did not seem that interesting. But also, I have to say, I was very afraid of him. He was a sick man. He had *mania presledovaniya* [persecution mania] ... and then, when he ended up in a mental institution, it was all taboo. My mother never talked about it. She never talked about their experiences during the War either. It was all too bitter for her to revisit. *Eta tema obhadilas molchaniem* [She passed over these subjects in silence].

After the War, the family had moved to Kherson, a town near Nikolaev, where Eva had located one of her sisters. There, Elena's mother found a job working as a typist at the local military base. Eva supported her two daughters and her invalid husband on her very low earnings. However, beyond the few *rubles* she received for her labor, the value of her post was the accommodation (one small room) provided on the military base, where the family could reside. But a couple of years later, Eva was fired because she was a Jew and, accused of being *vrag naroda* (an enemy of the state). Homeless, the family found shelter in a tiny 14-square-meter room in the basement of a local commissar who took pity on Eva and her three dependents.

It was a horrifying room where I lived until I was 16 years old and where my mother and sister lived for many years after I had left ... The low ceiling, which you could touch simply by raising your hand ... our bathroom, our potatoes, coal, firewood, our bed ... and my paralyzed father ... all in this pressing space ... Although back then, we were grateful even for that.

The Russian commissar who took them in was, according to Elena, "a very good man" who, despite his heartfelt respect for her mother, could not keep her at her post. "It was not up to him," Elena explained. "Everything was decided higher up [by state politicians]." She did not treat her mother's unfortunate fate as anything out of the ordinary: "It was [the early 1950s] a time of repression, the Doctors Plot etc. Jews were laid off everywhere." Where Victor and Olga continually stressed the different set of experiences of Jews in Odessa, Eva's situation in Nikolaev was typical of the general atmosphere of neutralized hardships that Jews were said to experience in the USSR. Although, like Victor and Olga, Elena recognized the role of personal relations in hostile Soviet times, she also seemed to hint at the ambivalent nature of local officials (like the commissar she mentioned) carrying out the orders of state politicians.

Elena acknowledged her mother's lack of loyalty to the Soviet regime, expressed in belief and in practice. She described her mother's political views as "progressively becoming anti-Soviet." As a result of the suffering she had endured, Elena told me, her mother came to see the state as a "false illusion of human equality." Eva, as her grandson described her in one of his emails, "was a very skeptical person by nature

who could not afford to rely on any self-evident truth in the form of higher authority – be it God or the Communist Party.”

Ukrainian by nationality

Despite the fact that both Elena's parents were Jewish, Elena's nationality was officially Ukrainian. During the War, her father had managed to forge his documents and change his inscribed nationality from Jewish to Ukrainian. This was a risky but common practice among Jews trying to avoid discrimination. When Elena was born, her birth certificate included both her mother's Jewish nationality and her father's falsified Ukrainian nationality. It was the latter that Elena would choose as her official nationality to be inscribed in the fifth line of her passport at the age of 16.

My whole life I passed as a Ukrainian. I don't know how my father managed to pull this off. My mother never told me. But it helped me get into the university on the first try and get a placement with Intourist – which, at the time, was a highly competitive organization where I doubt I would have ever been able to work as a Jew.

Elena recognized that her parents' decision to register her as Ukrainian was based on their desire to make her life “easier and safer” than their own. “I think my mother wanted to protect me from everything she had to deal with in her life time. I felt that she almost wanted to save me from the suffering she had seen in her life. I know it was done with the best intentions,” she concluded.

Elena graduated top of her class with a degree in French and proceeded to follow the career of her choice. In many ways she succeeded in living up to her family's dreams and expectations of full acceptance into society. Like Victor and Olga, Elena regarded herself as a *kulturny* (cultured) person and part of the Russian-speaking intelligentsia, for whom she had the utmost respect. She knew Ukrainian, as a result of her education in Kherson but regarded Russian as her native language. From what I gathered, Elena felt neither attached to her Ukrainian identity *kak radnoe* (as something intrinsically hers) nor disturbed by it. Rather, she accepted it as a *propisanaya lich'nost* (an ascribed identification). While I never heard anyone from a

Jewish organization discuss Elena's case specifically (and probably she herself would not have revealed such family details to them), I did hear what others said about people with a similar history to hers. Some elderly Jews greatly looked down on and mistrusted newly proclaimed Jews who had previously passed as Russian or Ukrainian. Others did not hold such strong views on the matter, understanding the various reasons for choosing to live as a non-Jew in the Soviet times and as a Jew today.

As I listened to Elena's stories, I also wondered whether others throughout her life had known of her secret. Her answers revealed the situational nature of her Jewishness, which in different periods of her life, and in different settings, she presented as she thought appropriate. During her primary education in Kherson, her Jewishness was neither a "mystery" nor an "issue" in a class where Jews constituted a majority. However, after she moved away from home and found herself in a new environment where, among her circle of friends and later co-workers, Jews constituted a minority, she did not speak about her Jewish roots.

While Elena explained to me that much of her socializing at university was among groups of intelligent and cultured people, she still recalled incidents of what she called "*bezkul'turnost* [cultureless behavior]" and ignorance expressed in anti-Semitic slurs. Elena remembered how in a number of situations she felt great discomfort at hearing derogatory comments about Jews not only because of their overall disturbing content but also because of her silenced yet "felt" Jewish identity.

I still knew I was Jewish despite what my passport said. *Ya eto chustvovala* [I felt this]. When I was younger no one called me a Jew, but I was always waiting for that to happen. I remember once at a summer camp, I was sitting next to a friend who had *vyrajenoe evreyskoye litzo* [an "obviously" Jewish face]⁹⁴ when a drunken man stumbled upon our group, pointed at my friend and started screaming, "*Zhidovka*, you dirty *zhidovka* [kike, you dirty kike]." I just sat there in

⁹⁴ Elena actually did not think that she "looked Jewish." Rapaport and Lomsky-Feder also point out that their informants "took it as self-evident that Jews have a typical appearance and body language, and they all dealt with the issue of how their appearance reveals or does not reveal their ethnic belonging" (2002:239).

silence but his words pained something in me. I remember thinking to myself, "Why do people have this reaction to Jews?"

While her Ukrainian nationality freed her from official discrimination, the grass-roots Soviet anti-Semitism she indirectly experienced exposed her to public views that perhaps made her further understand her parents' decision to try to mask her difference. As one of my informants once told me, "Jewish" was a synonym for being different in Soviet times: "You don't drink, what are you – Jewish?"⁹⁵

Reflecting on her Jewishness

Elena's false Ukrainian identity provided her with what one might call a "get out of jail free card," allowing her to receive a "rigorous Soviet education and become a *kulturny obrazovanyi chelovek* [cultured, educated human being]" bypassing Jewish quotas and discrimination. The goal, as I understood it, was not to escape her Jewishness as such but to escape all that the state pinned on that inscribed identity.

Openly and freely discussing her Jewishness when we met, Elena tried to explain to me what informed her Jewish identification both in the past and in the present. While she connected her Jewishness to the painful experiences of her family – which she said she carried in her *dusha* (soul) – she also presented me with more personal memories that gave a more positive meaning to her Jewish identification.

Although Elena had initially told me that no Jewish traditions were observed in her family, she later remembered some details that belied this. For example:

On *Pesah* I remember my mother making the most delicious *matzah*. She also baked what she called Haman's Ears [triangular "ear shaped" pastries traditionally baked for the holiday of *Purim*],⁹⁶ both of which she made from her own mother's recipes. So something [of Jewish traditions] was there.

⁹⁵ Today, leaders of Odessa's religious communities have adopted this ideology of difference but now marketed as a positive rather than negative trait. For them the old Soviet joke would go: "Of course he doesn't drink! He is Jewish!"

⁹⁶ The festival commemorates the miraculous foiling of Haman's plot to kill all the Jews of Persia.

However, Elena's mother never passed on any recipes to her, perhaps, Elena speculated, because she was the youngest and cooking chores were the responsibility of her elder sister.

In another conversation, as we walked past Migdal Or, the Jewish Theater, Elena recalled:

I remember the time that my mother took us to see the Yiddish Theater that came on tour to Kherson. I was young and could not understand much. It was all so foreign to me, women with covered heads speaking those funny words [in Yiddish]. My mother explained to us that it was a performance of a Jewish wedding.

Many "tales" about her Jewish ancestors Elena inherited from her two maternal aunts who, as mentioned above, had grown up in a family environment her mother never witnessed herself. Their stories Elena regarded as "fairy tales" that, as fairy tales often do, allowed her to imagine a different reality from her everyday life.

A Godless world

In our conversations, Elena was very clear about the fact that religious belief had no part in her upbringing. "Both of my parents were atheists and my mother used to tell me, 'How could anyone believe in God after what happened to the Jews during the War?'" During our discussion of present-day renovations of religious buildings in the city, Elena recalled an occasion when she, her mother and her sister were walking past an old church undergoing restoration. "We girls wanted to peek inside but our mother simply refused to do so. She waited for us outside." As Elena went on to explain, "She didn't believe in religion or religious institutions, not even enough to set foot in its man-made manifestations." In an email to me from her grandson (mentioned above), Victor writes, "My grandmother [Eva] was vehemently opposed to religion (not only Judaism but religion in general) because she had to cope with the not-so-bright reality around her and could not waste her time on fairy tales and utopian beliefs." At the

end of her days, when her body surrendered to a long battle with cancer, Eva had asked to be cremated⁹⁷ and buried in Kherson – where she had lived for most of her life. This wish Elena and her elder sister carried out in 1993 when their mother passed away.

As we were sitting around her kitchen table, Elena told me that she considered herself Jewish, but “*Ya interesyus’ Yevreystvom kak kul’tura* [I am interested in Jewishness as a culture [pause] *v boga ya ne veru* [I don’t believe in God].” Manifesting her cultural interest, and in the light of her planned immigration to Israel, she was taking Hebrew lessons at one of the Orthodox synagogues and Migdal. But this was quite separate from religious belief. She told me that, throughout her teaching career, she had come across students from religious backgrounds who would question her atheist stand.

I once had an Armenian student who was a member of the Armenian Church here in Odessa. Around Easter he came to my house greeting me with the common Easter phrase “*Isus voskrest* [Jesus has risen],” “*V istene* [in truth],” I answered. Recognizing the lack of conviction in my voice, he asked me, “Elena Michaelovna, do you not believe in God?” “No,” I answered, “I do not.” “Well, who do you believe in then?” Looking at him I said, “I believe in you – *Ya veru v cheloveka* [I believe in the human being].”

In her opinion, a great number of religious people do good things because they are afraid that God will punish them if they do otherwise. “*Oni eto delaut pod palkoy Boga* [They do it under the stick of God],” she told me:

And I try to do *dobro* [good deeds] because I am a *chelovek* [human being], because I am a *ku’lturny* [cultivated] *chelovek*, *vospitanyi* [well raised/educated/mannered] human being and I believe that as a human being I have to act *dostoino* [with dignity], try to help others, grow as a person, and not cause harm to others. This is how I was raised and this is how I was always taught to behave without religious presence in my life. Religion does not make you a better person as religious leaders like to suggest, they have it all backwards.

⁹⁷ According to *halakha*, cremation is a great sin and highly condemned. In the Soviet Union, however, cremation was a common practice among Jews and others. Today, cremation continues to be a popular burial procedure for many ex-Soviet citizens, including Jews.

Beyond the synopsis of current religious conflicts around the world she presented me with, she went on to tell me of religious Jewish families here in Odessa who put on a front of being good but in reality, "they only want good things for their own." Like my other informants mentioned earlier, Elena had little contact with Odessa's newly organized centers of activity or actively involved Jews, although (based on insights from her Hebrew classes) she seemed skeptical about born again believers among Odessa's Jews and questioned their motives for religious affiliation.

Children

In raising their two sons, Elena and Konstantin tried to teach them how to be good people first and how to be Jewish, Ukrainian, Russian etc second. Officially, their sons were registered as Russian in their documents and, from what I gathered, found out about their Jewish roots only at school age, which they each explored in their own way. As Elena explained, "Yes they both consider themselves Jews but it means very different things to each of them. Dmitry does not complicate his life with questions about his Jewish identity but Victor is sincerely interested in our family history, Jewish history and Israeli politics although he, unlike his brother [Dmitry], does not live in Israel."

Elena then shared this story. One day her elder son Dmitry came home from school and asked her, "Mom, do you know what OEE means?" he said laughing. "No," she answered. "It means *ostarojno edit evrei* [be careful, Jew behind the wheel]." "What's so funny?" Elena then asked, furious. "Is it the 'be careful' part that's making you laugh, the 'behind the wheel' part, or the word 'Jew?'" Answering "no" to all but her last question, Dmitry lowered his head. Calmly, Elena then said, "Why is the word 'Jew' funny to you? It is just a nationality, just like Russian, Ukrainian, English etc. Are those funny to you as well?" "No," he answered. "Do you want to see a Jew?" she asked him, in turn pointing her finger at his small round face. "You are a Jew, I am a Jew, your aunts and your cousins are Jews." "But why am I a Jew?" Dmitry asked, puzzled. "Because I am a Jew," Elena answered. She concluded the story by saying

that that 7-year-old boy grew up and was the first in her family to apply for Israeli citizenship and move to Israel. Of course, it must be added that his emigration to Israel, similar to many others leaving the former Soviet bloc after it collapsed, was not due to Zionist or religious calling, to relocate to a historic homeland, and does not speak of a heightened Jewish identity on his part. Rather, as his mother described, "He was going *na boom* [with no expectations] to try life in another country and, I think, to secure another citizenship and country of residence in case his business started to become a concern in Russia's environment."

She told me that her younger son, Victor, was very passionate about his Jewish background. "I tell him everything I remember." While living in the United States he has become a member of an international Jewish youth organization Hillel, which both Elena and Konstantin approved of, although it seems that they regard it first and foremost as a good network of friends who support their son along with other international students during their study abroad. On the whole, Elena was under the impression that her sons' respective locations further enriched their Jewish orientation, which she welcomed as a secular cultural Jewish ideology which she herself shared.

Post-Soviet present

Before leaving for Israel, Elena's exposure to Odessa's organized Jewish life consisted of her weekly attendance at Hebrew classes at the Litvak Orthodox Synagogue, Or Sameach and Migdal. She told me she thoroughly enjoyed learning languages and the free Hebrew lessons would help her maneuver as one of the *olim hadashim* (newly arrived immigrant in Israel). Her husband, who relied on her linguistic talents, had opted not to take Hebrew classes. On a number of occasions Elena visited the Israeli Cultural Center⁹⁸ (where her family documents were under review for emigration (see

⁹⁸ Serving as an official consulate of the state of Israel, the center also functions as an educational and cultural facility for those interested in Israeli life and culture.

Chapter 3 pp. 138 for further discussion on scrutiny of documents) for scheduled appointments and to attend free lectures on different topics of Israeli life. She expressed a certain degree of discomfort at being in religious Jewish establishments because of her atheist beliefs and also their "Orthodox and stuffy atmosphere." Even so, she regarded their sheer presence as a positive development in post-Soviet society. She would often ask me to tell her of my insights into the religious congregations in the city, curious about the rituals and traditions practiced on religious holidays or on *Shabbat*. She occasionally read Jewish newspapers, picking them up during her lessons but never taking out a subscription.

The migration of her son and other members of her family (her sister, two of her cousins and their extended kin) to Israel brought her closer to an Israeli-centered Jewish identity and exposure to Israeli life – which, not too long ago, had become Elena and Konstantin's everyday reality. When I asked Elena why they had not emigrated earlier, she answered, "We had good jobs and a good life here. We saw no reason to leave." Her family, as she explained, left mostly for economic reasons and in hopes of a better life for their children.

Kherson was just a dead city. You would walk down the streets and nothing just nothing ... In Nikolaev at the time ship building collapsed, causing more people to be unemployed than employed. My sister, for instance, saw no prospects for her children, having herself lost her job as an accountant at a local state factory.

Elena's comments confirmed much of the existing research, which reveals the nature of economic motivations in the latest wave of ex-Soviet citizens emigrating to Israel and other destinations from the former Soviet territories (Zissels 1999:301).

Elena expressed her great admiration and love for Odessa and her sense of comfort in their life here. "I became a true *Odessitka* here." "We will have a hard time leaving,"

she often told me. "We have such wonderful friends and everything here is *rodnoye nam* [native/dear to us]. Odessa is our home."⁹⁹

Nina Malahova

Unlike Olga and Victor but similar to Elena, Nina Malahova's life involved emigration. But she is the only one of the three to leave and return to Odessa after many years of living in Israel. Like all of the above informants, Nina strongly identified with being an Odessan and saw the city as home.

When I first phoned Nina with a greeting message from a fellow anthropologist and our friend in common, Tanya Richardson, she suggested that I meet her on one of her weekend strolls with the Odessa Walking Group.¹⁰⁰ Every Saturday for close to six years now, Nina, with a group of about 20 other middle-aged and elderly Odessans, attended a free walking tour "Old Odessa" led by a half-Russian half-Jewish middle-aged man, Valerii Netrebsky. During these leisurely strolls, the audience – most of whom were native members of the local intelligentsia and themselves rather knowledgeable about the city's history – came together to walk through Odessa's historical sites: listening, learning, commenting on and debating Netrebsky's guided tour. Going on these walks became part of my regular routine. I was able to build relationships beyond the walks with some members of the group while others, despite their openness to answering my questions in the context of the walks, preferred to keep their distance elsewhere. Nina, perhaps due to our previously established connection, was immediately open and welcoming. It is her family life history that I will now summarize here.

⁹⁹ When I last saw Elena in Netanya in spring 2009, she seemed rather well acclimatized to her new life in Israel and enjoyed the freedom in travel she now exercised as an Israeli citizen. She also shared with me the feeling of liberation she felt in living her life openly as a Jew, which seemed more difficult for her, even in the post-Soviet environs of her native city, than in Israel. Israel had served as a new beginning in her Jewish orientation where she no longer had to hide her real nationality.

¹⁰⁰ See Richardson (2005) for a detailed description of the Odessa Walking Group.

Rosalina (Nina) Leihter was born in Odessa on 22 June 1934. Fourth-generation *Odessitka* of Jewish descent, she grew up in an upper middle-class family whose elite status in the city gradually declined with the coming of the USSR and disappeared after the Nazi occupation during WW II.

Nina, who was often described by her friends as “poetic,” due to her romanticized outlook on life – not to mention her actual love for poetry – was a tall, medium-framed woman with yellowish hazel eyes and light brown wavy hair, which she wore short, parted, and tucked behind her ears. Her soft voice, which she further muted by always covering her mouth when she spoke, made you feel as though she was always afraid that someone might hear the details of her conversation. An artist by education and profession, she tailored her own dresses, knitted her own berets and decorated just about every square inch of her apartment with her own stained glass and ceramic pieces, as well as her early works in water colors sketched during her first years at the Odessa Art Academy. On one of the walls of her living room (which also served as her bedroom) a collage of black and white photographs of Nina’s family was like a miniature family museum, which she often referred to when telling me stories about her ancestors. Next to the pictures of her family, there was a photograph of her old house in a faded sepia color. Above it was a small wooden icon of Jesus which she had draped with a plastic beige-colored rosary. Nina, as I later learned, was a congregant of the local Evangelical church (see Chapter 6 where Nina’s religious orientation is described in greater detail). Her religiously Christian and ethnically Jewish orientation was something she did not present as a major contrast, although she was aware of the fact that others might.¹⁰¹ All these pieces of Nina’s life found their order and connection to one another in the stories she told me throughout our friendship. Over the period of a year I conducted interviews at Nina’s house, joined her on her daily

¹⁰¹ Deutsch Kornblatt, in her research on Jewish Christians in the FSU, explains that “many Jews in the Church are reluctant to identify themselves publicly for fear of discrimination from both Jews and Christians” (2003:221). Highly relevant to Nina’s case, Deutsch Kornblatt also notes that “Jews who converted to Christianity and then arrived in Israel under the Law of Return have legal fears as well” (2003:221 n. 2).

routines of shopping at the market, visited her family graves with her, and engaged in many informal conversations during our walks throughout the city.

Her apartment, which she was always in the process of selling, was one room with a narrow corridor connecting it to a small kitchen and a toilet. This ground floor space used to be part of a *komunalka* (communal apartment) bought up and remodeled into four poorly done apartments sold individually by the new owner. The cramped space itself was not an issue for Nina but, because of her fear of the dark – which had developed during her time spent in the Odessa catacombs and the ghetto – she felt that the place was gloomy and depressing. Also, every detail of her neighbor's conversations could be heard through the paper thin walls and, as she assumed, her own. When I would visit her in her apartment she would immediately turn on the radio or her old TV to deaden the sound of our voices.

When we met, Nina had been living there for close to six years. In 1990 when she had decided to emigrate to Israel with her younger son, she had passed on her former apartment (which she was allocated by the *koperative*) to her elder son who – in turn had emigrated to Germany five years ago and, since the building was by then privatized, sold the flat on to strangers. When Nina returned from Israel some ten years later she could only afford her one room residence. She lives alone. Widowed by her first husband and divorced from her second, she is a single mother of her two sons, Yura (38 years old), and Kostya, (33 years old). Although Yura's Russian wife and daughter lived in Germany, he spent most of his time in Odessa where, according to Elena, he preferred the lifestyle and work opportunities. Kostya, Yura's half brother, who had returned to Odessa from Israel, following his mother's lead, then moved back to Israel (unsure of his plans for the future) a couple of months before I left the field.

Although Nina is retired, she occasionally shows her art at various exhibitions around the city but never for sale. "I don't have the facilities to create something new and this is all I have left to show for my years of work," she told me, pointing to her display of ceramic plates, each decorated with colorful images of nature. She lives on a monthly

pension of 400 *grivnas* (approximately £50) as well as a slightly higher sum of monetary compensation from the German government as a ghetto survivor. The two sums combined allow her to live month to month. She is often concerned about her health and worried about being left alone if her children permanently leave Odessa. "You see," she explained, "in Israel they really take care of the elderly, here no one does anything." Yet, despite her admiration for the Israeli medical system, she had no regrets about deciding to return to Odessa. "This is where I feel at home, my whole family is here [buried at the Third Jewish Cemetery] and my whole life is here. Of course I came back to a lot of new but I came back home."

Childhood memories

Nina's own mother, Tauba Komar, whose name on her falsified Ukrainian passport was Tatiana Larushkina, was born in 1905 to a middle-class, Odessan Jewish family. Her ancestors had originally migrated to Odessa in the mid 19th century. She was one of nine children raised by her mother, Rosalina, who, because her husband had a well paid job in the textile industry, could afford to stay home with her family.

All of the Komar children who survived to adolescence (Tauba, her two sisters and three brothers) received their primary and secondary secular education in Odessa. Tauba attended the local state gymnasium where, on top of the standard subjects, she had mastered many foreign languages and developed a passion for classical music and piano. On graduation, Tauba had enrolled in Odessa's nursing school, where she finished the course with high honors and began her career in medicine. In the early 1920s Tauba met her future husband, Osip Leihter, whom she married in 1924 in a civil ceremony conducted in the Odessa City Hall. Four years later, they had their first daughter, Frida (later renamed Galina) and, six years later, their second daughter Rosalina (later renamed Nina).

Osip, Nina's father, was one of five boys born to observant Jewish parents, Yakov and Frida Leihter. He was a craftsman by education, inheriting both his profession and his workshop from his father. Following his father's death, Osip and his elder brother,

logan, were responsible for the family business of metal goods production. After the Revolution, when private property was confiscated by the state, Osip and his brother had managed to hold on to their shop by hiding its operations. In the meantime, they had begun working as manual laborers at a German-owned factory called Gena where one of their elder brothers, Ruvin, worked as a first class engineer following his education in Munich. In the late 1930s the eldest of the Leihter brothers, Sasha, emigrated to the United States, never to be heard from again. Lev, the youngest, worked as a teacher and, as a result of his marriage to a non-Jewish woman and conversion to the Evangelist faith, he was, according to Nina's stories, totally ostracized by his father and to a lesser degree by the rest of the family.

Among her parents' generation, intermarriage occurred on both sides of the family, albeit not without consequent strains in family relations. As Nina recalled, her grandparents did not approve, viewing those who "married out" as "abandoning their traditions." Neither Tauba nor Osip themselves were close to religion in their Jewish identification. Although Nina believed that her father was most likely educated in a *heder*, she did not recall any religious practice in his daily routine.

They were all circumcised, I know that. And logan was religious – or so it seemed to me then. He always dressed in black and walked around with a prayer book. But my father did not believe in God ... My mother never even spoke about religion because she was not religious herself and also because it was prohibited.

Prior to the Revolution, the Leihter family had owned two houses on Primorskaya Street in one of the most elite areas of the city, near the sea. One of their properties was confiscated by the Sovjet regime while the other was vandalized and taken over by their neighbors during the Nazi occupation of Odessa. To this day, Nina still visited her old house, now nothing more than a concrete skeleton, to pay her respects to her ancestors. She told me that she liked to see the trees her father and grandfather planted, the yard where she remembered celebrating her birthday – and especially the smell of the seaside air which infused her memories of the playground of her early years.

"The War took everything from us"

When the evacuation of Odessa started in 1941, Nina's family did not follow the flood of evacuees. Indeed, they waited until "it was already too late." Nina's family, and in particular her uncle Ruvin who had spent over four years living in Germany, refused to believe that Germans would invade their city. "Ruvin used to say, 'it's all a conspiracy against the leaders of civilization [the Germans].'" At the same time, the family was concerned about just abandoning their property and her father's workshop "We did not know what would happen to our house and all our things once we left. We had so many valuables," – listing for me their collection of books, their white piano, bicycles, workshop machinery and so on. And so they stayed on, going into hiding. In her words:

When the Nazis invaded Odessa we had nowhere to run. The ships leaving the port were over crowded with people, screaming children, crying mothers ... I remember watching one of the ships go up in flames as the Romanians started bombing the port. At first we hid in the city's underground catacombs but, due to its damp and dark atmosphere, we could not stay there longer than a few days. The Romanians were looking for Jews everywhere and they relied heavily on the aid of the local Russians and Ukrainians. When Romanian soldiers were coming to my courtyard, my mother would hide my father and his brothers in the basement of the house while asking my sister and me to silently sit in our room. There were signs everywhere telling Jews to gather at what they called "meeting points," most of which were actual ghettos. We had already heard rumors that we would never come back alive, so we continued hiding. And one day, while I was standing on my balcony, I saw a Romanian soldier walk up to one of our neighbors, a young Ukrainian boy, and ask, "Where are the Jews?" In silence, the young boy pointed his little finger to the balcony where I stood. That day, my whole family was gathered and taken to the Slobodka which we thought was a meeting point but, as I later found, was our first ghetto.

Right in front of Nina's eyes, her uncle Ruvin was shot "like a dog" (because of his limp) in the first week of their imprisonment. Her father became very ill, and gradually losing his strength, could barely walk after a month of hard labor in the ghetto. In fear of losing her husband, Nina's mother tried to find ways for her family to escape the barbed wired walls. Finally, bribing one of the guards with the money her sister in law

had smuggled to them, Nina's family managed to flee into the wilderness of the nearby forest. For two months they remained hiding in the woods with no food or water, scavenging raw and frozen winter potatoes and melting snow to get drinking water. Nina told me that she would "never forget the coldness of those nights and the hunger of those days." It was not long after they had exhausted their last strength that they were once again captured by the Nazis and transferred to another ghetto located in a small town, Chechel'nik, in the Venezkaya region.

There Nina and her elder sister, Frida, lost their father. He died a few months into their sentence and was buried in a place that Nina has never been able to find since. Less than six months after his death, Tauba managed to secure a fake passport that identified her as Tatiana Semenovna Larushkina, of Ukrainian nationality. With this document she managed to escape with both her daughters to the nearest village, Lepizkoe, where they hid until the Soviet liberation of Ukraine.

Returning home after the War

Following the end of WWII, Tauba and her two daughters returned to Odessa. All of the Leichter brothers – with the exception of Sasha, the one who had emigrated to the United States – had been killed in the War. Tauba had one brother, Theodor, and one sister, Klavdia, who had survived the War. "We came back to nothing," Nina explained. "My family always considered themselves a lot better than the *mistekhovye* Jews around. We had our noses really high in the air but after the War our noses were so low they were buried underground."

Their apartment had been vandalized, robbed and taken over by people, including their neighbors, who thought that Jews would not be coming back. "We were able to live in one of the rooms of our old house as the others were occupied by our neighbors or complete strangers. Often we would see our belongings in other people's apartments but, under my mother's strict orders, we could not say a word." Nina explained to me at length how her mother never told anyone where they were,

keeping the past three years of their life a complete secret.¹⁰² In that sense, she (like Elena's mother, Eva) treated the subject of the War as taboo, surrounded with silence.

She [Tauba, Elena's mother] would often answer any questions about where we had been for the past couple of years with a simple answer: "evacuation." She never said anything more and at times less. I think she felt guilty for the fact that we survived while others did not and at the same time she felt scared that others would look at us as *pridateli* [traitors] who must have acted as spies for the Germans in order to secure and protect our lives. This was Stalin's conspiracy against Jewish survivors whom he labeled "enemies of the state." Following my mother's ways, we never talked about our time in the ghetto. Can you imagine living through what we did and never ever talking about it?

Tauba had kept her Ukrainian name, Tatiana Larushkina. It was during this period that Frida adopted the name Galina and Rosalina became Nina. The practice of changing one's name, as Fitzpatrick points out, was not unusual for Jews in the Soviet Union, both as a way to Russify their identity (and thus part with the "backwardness" of their distinctly Jewish names) and to escape their "dangerous" status as "enemies of the state" (1994:84). The three women lived together until Galina married and moved to Saint Petersburg. Tauba went back to work. It is notable that she chose an environment where silence was part of her daily routine: she worked in a deaf and mute orphanage as the head nurse and teacher for young children. Nina started secondary school, became a Pioneer (Young Pioneer of the Soviet Union) and later took the Komsomol oath. After graduation she continued her education at the Odessa Art Academy, specializing in applied arts.

Leaving and returning to Odessa

At the end of 1989 Nina had emigrated to Israel. Already a single mother, Nina's decision to leave Odessa was one she had to take alone and one that involved a lot of "back and forth thinking and contemplation." Like many others in her circle, Nina was

¹⁰² Stewart makes similar observations among the survivors of the Roma community in Romania who, following their return from Nazi concentration camps, remained silent in order to gain re-admission to their homes, villages and towns (2004:570).

unsure of the future for herself and her family in what she described as a “gloomy and bare city,” that she nonetheless loved and considered her *rodnym gorodom* (native city). One day, as Nina and I were walking down Pushkin Street, she recalled how, a few days before she left Odessa, she had stopped on this exact spot and picked up a handful of earth, which she had then carried with her in a plastic bottle all the way to Israel. “I wanted to take a piece of my home, a piece of my Odessa, with me.”

In our initial conversations, it had already become obvious that Nina’s decision to emigrate to Israel was not driven by any Zionist ideology of living in the Jewish homeland. She did not envision her move to Israel as “going home.” On the contrary, she described her emigration from Odessa as “leaving home.” At the same time, she told me, she was comforted by the idea that she was going to a place where no one would call her *zhidovka* (yid) and, in that sense, to a place where she would be made to feel at home.

Never traveling abroad before, Nina had no idea what life outside the USSR would entail. She had been briefed on housing, social security, citizenship and employment in information meetings organized by Sokhnut¹⁰³ but she did not have much sense of an insider’s view on Russian immigrant life in the “Holy Land,” unlike later migrants who had the benefit of letters and phone calls from those who had preceded them in moving to Israel. The question of where she was going seemed secondary to the question of departure per se. “Whether we would stay in Israel forever was not decided but the thought that we would be able to return seemed unimaginable.”

Nina traveled to Israel on a barge that sailed from the Odessa port to Jaffa, where she was met by Israeli state representatives who welcomed her and her son with an

¹⁰³ An Israeli organization that operates in the FSU to educate Jews about Israel and assist them in making *aliyah* (emigration to Israel).

instant immigrant visa.¹⁰⁴ However, as Nina explained, "Life in Israel was far from easy." She had a great deal of difficulty finding employment and hence financially supporting herself and her son. She also struggled with other social problems associated with an immigrant's life. "I was terribly homesick. When I heard the word Odessa I would have hot flashes and my eyes would light up. If I heard someone was from Odessa I would go out of my way to meet them, talk to them, invite them over for tea." This overwhelming nostalgia, and a certain curiosity about other options in the present, led Nina to book a ticket for a one-month return visit to Odessa in the summer of 1993. As she recalls, Odessa had not greatly changed. "It was still rather gray," she said, "but life was slightly jollier." She told me with excitement how she had visited Privoz market, among her other greatly missed places where she felt herself to be at home. After all, it was in this city that she had been born and spent 50 years of her life. It was in this city that her family graves spoke of her history and allowed her to imagine life prior to her own generation, as told in stories of her parents. It was a place where everything was familiar – from language to people to climate, architecture and trees ... where she did not have to prove herself, as an artist, as a person – where she could just be. It was a month that was very important to her, and yet she returned to Israel.

Five years later, as her economic situation in Israel became worse, Nina made up her mind to move back to Odessa. "I came back to a lot of new," she explained, "but I still came back home." To my question whether she missed Israel, she said "no." "On the contrary," she said, "I have started to see my life here in Odessa very differently and I developed a new love for this city through my weekly walking tours." Besides her occasional visits to the Gmilus Hesed club for elderly Jews, Nina did not partake in Jewish activities in the city or identify herself as being Jewish through any of the new avenues available to Jews in Odessa. Her two sons – now middle-aged – had taken

¹⁰⁴ In Israel, newly arrived immigrants can acquire citizenship within three months of their arrival, or once a person turns 18 years of age. One must already be in possession of an immigrant visa before official application for citizenship.

divergent paths. While the elder son, Yura, was allied to his mother's secular and non-affiliated Jewish orientation associated with being part of the Russian speaking intelligentsia, Kostya, the younger son (whose story is elaborated in Chapter 4 and 6), had recently become partially observant of Jewish religious commandments.

Like Victor and Olga, Nina's immediate ancestors regarded themselves as educated Russian Jews who enjoyed their social status in Odessa. This world was but a faint memory for Nina herself, whose earliest recollections were overshadowed by her experiences during the Nazi occupation. Nina's silenced Jewish identity and her official Ukrainian documentation, as with Elena, served as a crutch in her daily life after the War. She never denied her Jewish roots but did not boast about them either. Unlike Olga, however, Nina did not avoid talking about Jewish subjects because of her Soviet convictions but, rather, because of the fear and horror internalized as a result of her family's imprisonment.

Conclusion

This chapter has focused on the life and family histories of four individuals: Victor, Olga, Elena and Nina, whose personal stories are interwoven with the larger political processes and historical events of their time, described to me, or in my presence, in informal and semi-formal settings. I made a deliberate choice to include at least three generations of descendants as they provide the reader a glimpse of the everyday reality of Odessa's Jewish population alongside changes in practices and orientations from pre-Revolutionary days to today and contextualize some of the historical issues highlighted in Chapter 1 and addressed in subsequent chapters.

I have tried to present the individual stories of my informants in terms of the themes that they saw as central in their life and family trajectories. Victor and Olga, for instance, mainly concentrated on the changes in Jewish values and orientations, both in their own families and the greater Odessan Jewish population, which they described as "progressive." They underscored the accomplished and "assimilated" status of

Odessa's Jewry as a product of local urban culture, which they saw as one of the great modernizing achievements of their time. For them, contemporary Jewish educators in Odessa today were trying to reverse this progressive trend by inculcating the younger generation with the patterns of a traditional Judaism that they and their families had voluntarily given up.

Elena's story focused on her hidden Jewish identity and the hardships of the War and then the Soviet anti-Semitism that her parents had endured. However, Elena also relayed more positive memories of Jewish cooking, family stories, teaching her children about their Jewishness and learning Hebrew herself, as part of her plan to move to Israel. For Nina, the tragedy of losing members of her family, the family property and social status in the city was a major theme of her story, as was her departure from and return to Odessa – which, in itself, became her new hobby through her weekly walking tours.

Taking the four life histories together, I have also identified some of the subjects that cross over in all or some of the stories, such as their memories associated with the Soviet period, their reflections on their own and their family's Jewishness, Russianness and Ukrainianness; their relationship with Odessa and thoughts on its distinctiveness as its own place of local history; their memories about the War, and their sense of the present-day socio-political atmosphere of Odessa.

The range of lived experiences of Odessa's Jews demonstrate the ambiguities and ambivalences embedded in memories and representations of Jewishness, which collectively question any single interpretation of Jewish identity and experience in the Soviet Union. Olga, for instance, in recalling her experience of the War and anti-Jewish sentiment, stressed the distinctive nature of her native city and the way discriminatory policies were offset by "personal relations [which] determined more than state politics." However, this is directly challenged by Nina's story of Ukrainian and Russian collaborators in Odessa and her personal betrayal by a neighbor (albeit a child). Unlike Victor and Olga, Nina and Elena expressed ambivalent feelings towards the Soviet

state. Elena blamed the old political system for treating her mother as an “enemy of the state” because she was a Jew and thus causing her to become unemployed; Nina criticized Stalin’s regime for treating her family and other survivors of the Nazi occupation as “traitors.” Although Nina herself joined Komsomol, and Elena showed understanding for her husband’s membership of the Communist Party, neither of these women expressed the admiration for Soviet days that Olga proclaimed. Moreover, secularism was adopted for different reasons: for Olga and Victor it was identification with the modernizing project of socialism, while Elena’s mother denounces God because of undeserved Jewish suffering. All of the narrators proudly described their achieved status in society as members of the Russian-speaking intelligentsia and as individuals of a cultured background who had enjoyed their careers in the art, tourism, academia and history. In all cases, Jewishness was one of their inherited identifications, in other words, one strand of their being, but it was by no means the only prism through which they judged their own experiences or those of others. Other social roles and allegiances (also) defined their relationship to the state, their city, family, friends and colleagues.

This set of reflections also displays a range of different views about contemporary Jewish life in Odessa. Victor and Olga questioned the sincerity of newly observant Jews and shunned foreign rabbis and Jewish emissaries. While they participated in organized Jewish life, it was on their own terms, along with selected “like-minded people” who regularly convened at the Club for Elderly Jews or the Literature Museum. Elena, possibly due to her previously masked Jewish identification, had only recently approached Jewish organizations in the city and mainly used them as education centers for her future life in Israel. She welcomed Odessa’s openness to ethnoreligious freedom but, like others in her generation (although there are factors more specific to her), did not feel comfortable in solely Jewish groups or highly religious settings. Nina, after her long absence from Odessa, reached out to Odessan, rather than exclusively Jewish Odessan groups, where she and others shared their passion for walking and discussing Odessa’s history. She, too, was a member of the

Club for Elderly Jews, which supplied her with medical and other benefits, but, unlike Olga and Victor, she did not take much part in their activities. For all of these elderly, ex-Soviet Jews, living in Odessa stood for a meaningful existence in which personal family histories were interwoven with old courtyards and houses, family graves and documents, climate, architecture and, simply, just earth.

"Ethnicity without content"?

Soviet-raised Jews are often depicted as a highly assimilated, secular and non-observant group, then equated to a category "largely emptied of its cultural content" (Chervyakov et al. 1997:281) with few, if any, key markers of Jewishness. Following 70 plus years of Soviet leadership, as Igor Krupnik puts it, the tragedies of the Holocaust and massive migration, Jewish identity in the Soviet Union evolved as:

an ethnicity without an ethnic language; without Judaism as a religion or a way of life; without major cultural markers such as rituals, education, and public performances; without community organization; and even without deep historical roots and memory. (1994:141)

For Krupnik, this stands by contrast to the situation prior to the 1917 Revolution, when the Jewish population of the Russian Empire had seen itself, and was seen by others, as a religious community. It was the "social engineering" of the Communist state that, in Krupnik's view, accounts for the absence of Jewish features among Soviet-born Jews (1994:139). This picture is also endorsed by a number of research initiatives on both the continuously resident ("sedentary") and emigrant communities, in which scholars depict Soviet Jews as having a "largely hollowed Jewish identity" (Gitelman 2001[1988]:271; Ritterband 1997:332, 336).

At one level, this can be taken as a crude stereotype often heard in public discourse and the media of Jewish communities abroad (mostly in the USA, Israel and Germany) where local Jews, encountering large numbers of Russian Jewish immigrants, dub these newcomers simply "Russians," echoing a joke common among immigrants themselves: "In Russia we were Jews and now in Israel we became Russians" (Fialkova and Yelenevskaya 2007:52–53). However, as an academic position, it is in need of

careful examination – and strong criticism. While it is generally true that Russian Jews have a strong attachment to Russian (and at times Soviet) culture, which they often opt to sustain after emigration, the supposed sheer absence of Jewish traits, as this chapter has shown at some length, is a shallow interpretation of their many lived experiences. Insufficient attention is dedicated to actual testimonies in which Soviet Jews describe the changing nature of their own and their family's Jewishness. The life histories presented here reveal how the memory of family history, and hardships endured, served to connect many Jews to a complex, but nonetheless very real, Jewish orientation. In the case of Victor, Olga, Elena and Nina, Jewishness is more subtle, nuanced, privatized and internal than the literature suggests.

The problem of ethnicity without content is an old problem described by Herbert Gans in the context of American immigrant communities (including the Jews) as “symbolic ethnicity” (Gans 1956). Jews in the Soviet Union (although exposed to different pressures and opportunities of assimilation than the Jewish and other immigrant groups Gans describes) have also come to regard themselves as Jewish mostly along secular, ethno-cultural lines without practice or participation in Jewish ethnic or religious culture. Similar to Gans's informants, many Jews at the turn of the 20th century and more intensely during Soviet rule, immersed themselves in the larger Russian, Soviet and, in my case, Odessan culture and found it more rewarding than paying obeisance to their old Jewish culture, which, with time, had little meaning besides pleasing the older generations (Gans 1994:579).

Unlike the American case, however, Jews in the USSR represented an official and legal group with an ascribed title in their documentation, which made their Jewishness less “symbolic” and voluntary and more official (excluding cases like Elena who hid the fact that they are Jewish in their documentation). Nor could it be described as without social cost, as in Gans's concept. Moreover, state-implemented assimilation (especially during late Soviet rule), and the ban on religious practice and rise in adherence to Socialist ideals that followed, presents a much weaker evolution of a “Jewish object culture,” which many of Gans's mainly second-generation American

Jews used as tools of Jewish symbolic ethnicity (Gans 1956). Nonetheless, Jews in the Soviet Union, in similar vein to American (or other European Jews), developed their own set of symbols (both positive and negative) by which they recognized one another and regarded themselves as Jews. For most (urban) Jews these were mainly concentrated on the value of education, career achievement and participation in the activities of the Russian speaking intelligentsia but also on quotas and other forms of anti-Semitism. On a more intimate level, symbols of Jewish cuisine, family stories, personal experiences, documents and more also enriched their Jewish belonging.

What escapes categorization in any of these characterizations of “ethnicity without content” is the way that the values of education, career achievement and participation in the activities of the Russian-speaking intelligentsia were seen *as Jewish*, a distinctive urban Jewish way of living and approaching the world (and also distancing themselves from *shtetl* Jews). Other ethnographic studies of ex-Soviet Jewry also challenge perceptions of a culturally, religiously and socially “naked” Soviet Jew and demonstrate that Jews engage in “contradictory but always meaningful and contextual processes of identity formation,” as they combine the supposed mutually exclusive categories of Russian (Ukrainian or Georgian) and Jewish (Goluboff 2003:6; see also Golbert 2001a, Cooper 1998, 2004).¹⁰⁵ Fialkova and Yelenevskaya also point out that many of their Russian Jewish informants interviewed in Israel “spoke about some elements of the Jewish tradition that had been preserved in families despite all the obstacles. But the meaning of the tradition had undergone significant changes, often remaining obscure even to those who tried to observe it” (2007:66).

The following chapter leaves behind the lives of Victor, Olga, Elena and Nina and moves on to the next generations – and the recent, highly visible, developments on Odessa’s Jewish frontier.

¹⁰⁵ See Markowitz (2003:52) for a different argument as she proposes that the overlapping of Russian and Jewish identities becomes possible only for those who emigrated to Israel and America.

PART II

Jewish Revival: The View from Within and Outside

Chapter 3

Places of Belonging in Today's Jewish Odessa:

New Laws, Organizations and Values

We used to be the Jews of Silence because we were afraid to speak; now we are the Jews of Silence because other Jews will not listen to us. We knew that we were ignorant and had been robbed of knowledge and tradition. But we thought that together with you, with your help we could recover our sense of independent Jewish self and community. Not to be treated as objects of what you thought we should be or do, but as autonomous subjects.

Yosif Zissels, Ukrainian Jewish leader
(cited in Horwitz 2003:125)

Introduction

In the years since Ukrainian independence in 1991, Odessa has experienced a large influx of Jewish international organizations and emissaries whose efforts and economic resources are focused on reviving and providing for the welfare of the local Jewish population. Here, as in the rest of the FSU, these projects are mainly sponsored and spearheaded by international Jewish organizations and private donors primarily from the United States and Israel. Many earlier local initiatives that sprang up at the end of Soviet rule have been incorporated into the larger apparatus of foreign Jewish development, as they were not able to sustain themselves individually. Today a number of members of the local Jewish intelligentsia are active in "uncovering and popularizing the cultural history of Odessa" mainly through publications, organized talks, tours around Jewish landmarks in the city and their contribution to Migdal and the Museum of the History of Odessa's Jews (Richardson 2008:188). Compared to the religious orientation of the religious congregations, or the Zionist ideology of Israeli-

based programs organized by Sokhnut and the Israeli Cultural Center, the efforts of the Jewish intelligentsia are centered around a cultural history of the place.¹⁰⁶ While some projects initiated by Odessa's local Jews have permanently added to the city's cultural landscape (for instance Migdal and the Museum of the History of Odessa's Jews), others, like the Jewish Self-Education Center described by Richardson in 2001–2, have since closed due to lack of funding and insufficient number of participants.¹⁰⁷ The Odessa local City Council has contributed to the project of renewal by handing over three Jewish synagogue buildings for the use of the Jewish organizations.¹⁰⁸ The local initiatives launched at the end of the Soviet era hardly compare in their rate of growth and popularity with the programs developed by the work of American and Israeli Jews and philanthropic projects of Western Jewry.

Contemporary international interventions can be traced back to the mass initiatives to save Soviet Jewry launched during the 1970s: pressure from American Jewry and others lobbying to "Let Our People Go" eventually forced Soviet leaders to allow some of their Jewish citizens and their families to emigrate (see Friedman and Chernin 1999; Altshuler 2005). The mission to save Soviet Jewry also focused on the way of life of those who chose to stay on after the fall of the USSR, restoring what was taken to be long-forgotten, forbidden or abandoned elements of Jewish life: Jewish education, religious institutions and cultural activities. Put in a nutshell, foreign initiatives were devoted to helping Jews leave or helping them live. Today, Odessa is not unique in being the recipient of religious and national initiatives to save, rejuvenate, relocate, or redress Jewish life. Since the decline and ultimate breakup of the USSR, countries such as Russia, Ukraine generally and neighboring FSU states have all become active arenas

¹⁰⁶ These various initiatives do cross paths and overlap in certain projects. Thus, a number of the local Jewish intelligentsia I knew wrote for one of the two Jewish newspapers sponsored and published by the two Jewish Orthodox congregations.

¹⁰⁷ The fact that students of the synagogue-sponsored classes (STARS) have their tuition paid possibly has something to do with the lack of popularity of courses offered without a stipend (see Richardson 2008:240 n18 for similar conclusions).

¹⁰⁸ Today the former butchers' synagogue houses the Jewish community/cultural center, Migdal, while the other two buildings, the Central (Glavnaya) Synagogue and the former tailors' synagogue, are once again used for their original purpose.

for foreign initiatives among the local Jewish population, who may have forgotten, may have never learned or may have abandoned their Jewish traditions under the Soviet modernization project. As Golbert has observed of Jewish youth in Kiev, Ukraine's capital, such interventions have led to the "remaking of cultural identities and allegiances from a wide range of old and new cultural models emanating both from within and outside the geo-historical borders of Ukraine" (2001b:713). My research seeks to illuminate both the various "forums of ideological agendas" (Cooper 1998:30) that claim to represent the city's Jewish revival and the responses by which local Jewry adopt, question and contest the discourses, practices and visible representations of being Jewish.

Today Jewish life is a visible part of the city's identity – from Odessa's kosher restaurants to the sight of traditionally dressed religious families, readily available Jewish newspapers, street signs along the main road directing drivers to the city's two Orthodox synagogues¹⁰⁹ and the public display of Jewish religious festivals and life cycle ceremonies. During important Jewish holidays religious objects such as the *sukkah*¹¹⁰ and *hanukkiyah*¹¹¹ can be seen in major areas of the city; advertisements for Jewish (not necessarily kosher) cuisine are also prominently on display.

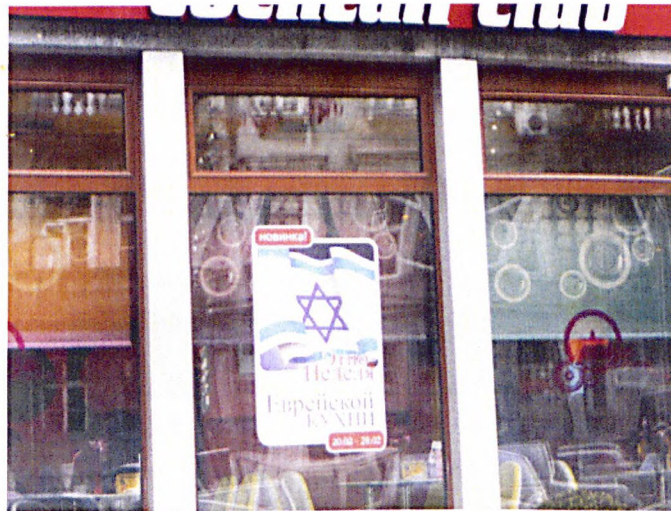
¹⁰⁹ Only the two Orthodox congregations promote such high visibility.

¹¹⁰ Ritual outdoor dwelling (booth or hut) where Jews take their meals and occasionally sleep during the holiday of *Sukkot*.

¹¹¹ A nine-branched candelabrum lit for *Hanukkah*. It is a custom of Chabad congregations to display large *hanukkiyahs* in the most central parts of their city. During my fieldwork, a 6-meter-tall *hanukkiyah* was erected in the most important square of the city, above the Potemkin Stairs.



6 *Sukkah* outside the Chabad synagogue



7 Advertisement for Jewish food week posted at one of Odessa's cafes

As Hann points out, the visible display of religion and its openness to transnational influences seen across post-Soviet states is very much a new phenomenon (2006:2).¹¹² In Odessa, the public display of Jewish culture and the visibility of Jewish religious practices undoubtedly constitute one of the major transformations in the Jewish life of the city. Yet, while new, this is portrayed by many as a Jewish religious revival. The

¹¹² In the Marxist–Leninist ideology, religion was the “opiate of the people,” and regarded as potentially dangerous irrational superstition. As Hann explains, “proselytizing and religious education in schools were prohibited and any display of religious commitment could prejudice not only one’s own job but also the position and prospects of a wide circle of relatives and friends” (Hann 2006:2).

primary recipient of these efforts is the long-standing population of Jews who opted not to emigrate. (Compared to other former Soviet cities that experienced mass Jewish emigration, Odessa has a relatively large “stay back” (so-called “sedentary”) number of Jewish residents.)

8 Jewish men carry Torahs on the streets of Odessa during the holiday of *Lag Ba-Omer*¹¹³

According to the local Jewish center Migdal, almost 80 percent of the Jewish population is affiliated by one means or another with at least one Jewish organization in the city, although affiliation does not always involve active participation. As well as the charitable organizations that mostly support the elderly, most programs are focused on the younger generation, who are seen as the future decision-makers on questions such as observance and migration and also cultural transmitters of all that is taught to them in various environments of Jewish education. The elderly are often seen as the “lost generation,” exhausted by their Soviet upbringing and age. Little, if

¹¹³ A minor Jewish festival, which marks the 33rd day of the *Omer* (a period of mourning) and commemorates the end of a devastating plague of numerous Jewish tragedies.

anything, is asked of them in the sense of following religious commandments. There is hope for the middle generation, whose contribution is considered extremely valuable in the upbringing of their children as Jews and who themselves might follow.

This chapter describes the new identifications of "Jewishness" that have entered into the rhetoric and cultural representation of Odessa's Jewry through the work of foreign emissaries and international Jewish organizations. My aim is also to document the responses to, and interactions with, these foreign-based ideologies, representatives, institutions and practices. The ethnography presented here indicates how various constructions of commonality and differentiation, built upon the diverse ideological agendas of Jewish representatives, are internalized, negotiated and disputed in the everyday life of Odessa's Jewish population. On this basis, I argue that the locus of Jewish belonging has not been definitively demarcated by the new voices claiming authority. Rather, one should speak of forums for recognition and contestation of different notions of Jewishness, those embedded in the old systems of meaning and those envisioned as "new."

The Beginnings of the Jewish Revival

During the Soviet period, when religious activity was banned, Odessa still had one functioning synagogue attended by a small number of elderly Jews on an irregular basis. There was no rabbi to lead a congregation, although the synagogue had a *starasta* (the eldest of the community). I was told that the first list of local Jews, compiled in the early 1990s by an American Jewish charitable organization (Joint), included the members of families who were in some ways affiliated with the synagogue. Most of the Jews I met in Odessa had only faint, and rarely first-hand, recollections of the synagogue's activities. The strongest memories were of visiting its bakery to drop off flour for making *matzah* for *Pesah*. Anna, an employee of the Odessa Literature Museum, recalled going to the bakery with her father, although he never explained (nor did anyone else) exactly what they were doing. She remembers that she would run into the small wooden house to give the baker a small sack of flour,

while her father waited outside. Anna assumed, never having had a chance to ask him while he was alive, that her father's membership of the Communist Party kept him from public display of, or affiliation with, anything Jewish.¹¹⁴

While Odessa had around 65,000 Jews¹¹⁵ prior to the fall of the Soviet Union, no wider official community structure existed, although a small number of short-lived underground organizations had sporadically appeared on the scene. In 1990 Ishaya Gisser – referred to almost universally as Shaya – a native of Odessa who had emigrated to Israel in the early 1980s, returned to the city with the mission of rebuilding local Jewish life. Although he had some rabbinic education at the time, he had not received his *semicha* (rabbinic ordination) to qualify for the title of rabbi (Gidwitz 1997). Nonetheless, filling the long-standing void of religious leadership, he is widely regarded by Odessa's Jewry as the first contemporary rabbi of the city, founding a religious congregation, Shomrei Shabbos, and persuading the City Council in 1992 to bestow the former tailors' synagogue (used in Soviet times as a warehouse).

Initially it attracted only a small number, as most of Odessa's Jewry was, and still is, highly assimilated and secular. In the words of one of my informants, Maya, "There were about 200 people when I first came to one of Shaya's events but, more important [than the numbers], there was the feeling of a *full* synagogue." Having met a few of Shaya's first students – some of whom still observe the Jewish commandments and some who have since chosen other paths of life – I was left with the impression that the early 1990s was experienced as a time of *nastoyashivo podyoma yevreyskovo samoosoznaiya* (true uplifting of Jewish self identification). In describing their first encounters with Judaism in Odessa, they used phrases such as: "true revival," "true enthusiasm," "true interest" and even "true fanaticism." At that time, they said, the incentive for affiliation was purely their sheer interest in learning what was previously

¹¹⁴ See Dragadze (1993:146–156) for a discussion of the "domestication" of religious practice in the USSR.

¹¹⁵ Estimates for 1989 range from 65,000 to 80,000. See Introduction.

forbidden or not spoken of. Of course, it was also a time when practically all previously state-organized youth movements, including Komsomol, had ceased to exist. So "lack of another collective," an "escape from the deep felt instability," "something new" and a "chance to meet interesting people" were also, more ordinary, reasons for affiliation.

Among my informants who had either been affiliated with Shaya's activities or who knew him through other social networks, there was a strong sentiment that he understood and represented the true character of an Odessan Jew. Unlike the current rabbis, he was a native of the place, an *Odessit*. Indeed, the lack of Odessan rabbis was a problem also often raised by local Jewish activists organizing secular Jewish cultural programs, which lacked the support and presence of the city's religious leadership.¹¹⁶

In the words of Mendy, who was studying with Shaya prior to moving to Jerusalem, he was "a man who grew up in this world and yet has seen the religious world." Shaya would often say, "A man close to God is not necessarily a good man," meaning, as Mendy explained, that Shaya understood that we were all human and did not elevate himself above others. In the Soviet era, Shaya himself had been jailed for his involvement with underground Jewish organizations. For Mendy, this experience had familiarized Shaya with all types of people. Shaya's time of struggle also had left him with a clear picture of what it meant to practice and study Judaism when it was finally allowed in the FSU. According to Maya, "His enthusiasm to be a practicing Jew was simply contagious." According to other informants, Shaya dedicated himself to building a Jewish community grounded in the history and people of Odessa. Evgeny, a journalist in his late sixties, praised Shaya for "helping people, not just Jews," and admired the openness and humanitarian nature of Shaya's "Odessan character." As

¹¹⁶ During the Festival of Jewish Diaspora produced by Migdal, many organizers expressed their disappointment with Odessa's current Orthodox rabbis, neither of whom attended any of the festival events or even advised their congregants of its program. "This is the problem with having non-Odessan rabbis," one organizer summarized.

his friends from the "old days" recall, Shaya never wanted to work under any one foreign authority and stayed away from any official affiliations. Describing Gisser, Betsy Gidwitz wrote in the late 1990s:

Shaya Gisser criticizes Zionism and Israeli efforts to promote *aliyah* [emigration to Israel]. Whereas other [foreign] rabbis focus on the teaching of Hebrew as an essential language in Jewish life, Shaya Gisser is hugely proud that he publishes the only Yiddish journal in Ukraine. Whereas others assiduously court foreign sponsors in search of funds that cannot be raised locally, Shaya Gisser disdains most international fundraising because, he says, foreign money means foreign control. (1997)

In 1993, three years after Shaya had returned to Odessa, the city received another rabbi, Rabbi Shlomo Baksht, from Israel, who established the Litvak Orthodox congregation, Or Sameach (later renamed Tikva Or Sameach),¹¹⁷ recruiting religious families from Israel to work as teachers in the first private Jewish religious school to operate in the city since the dissolution of Soviet regime.¹¹⁸ Rabbi Baksht's community was successful in reclaiming the original Glavnaya (Central) Synagogue (used during Soviet rule by Odessa University as a gymnasium), where his congregation is based today.

¹¹⁷ The Tikva Odessa Children's Home, set up in 1996, serves the needs of homeless and needy Jewish children in the city. Although sometimes referred to as an "orphanage," this is something of a misnomer since some children have living parents who simply are unable to care for them (see Fishkoff 2004a). In 2001 the two projects (the synagogue and the children's home) were combined into Tikva Or Sameach. Today Tikva Odessa remains the main sponsor of the Tikva Or Sameach congregation, attracting a great number of Jewish philanthropists from the United States, Israel, Britain and elsewhere who raise funds for its operation.

¹¹⁸ While a number of Israeli families have remained in Odessa since the first days of community operation, most stay for a period of two to four years.



9 Main prayer hall of the Tikva Or Sameach synagogue

With the help of foreign donations, Baksht has set up an extended network of Jewish schools, and founded the first Jewish university in the city, as well as establishing and then expanding a children's home for Jewish children. According to an employee of the congregation, today Tikva Or Sameach has close to 1,000 members.¹¹⁹

There was a strong sense among my informants that Rabbi Baksht's community was first and foremost concerned with Jewish education, primarily the teachings of the Torah and the Talmud, as has historically been the case for Lithuanian Orthodoxy and its followers, the "Litvaks."¹²⁰ For these achievements, he was often described by the local Jewry as a "man of the texts," adhering strongly to the Jewish laws and liturgy. His congregation was regarded as "the strictest and most closed and conservative" of

¹¹⁹ According to the official website of the organization, nearly 1,200 children benefit from schools, homes and university programs offered by Tikva. However, I found that the number of regular attendees at the synagogue significantly lower than the 1,000 mentioned by the employee of the congregation. Friday night services that I attended would draw about 30 to 50 women and approximately 50 to 80 men. Holiday celebrations attracted higher numbers of attendees which included a number of visiting Israeli families. During the celebration of *Sukkot* that I attended nearly 350 guests were present.

¹²⁰ Historically, Lithuanian Orthodoxy was identified with highly intellectual Talmud study. Litvaks are frequently characterized as more dogmatic and authoritarian than other branches of Ashkenazi Jewry. The movement is often closely linked to the teachings of Rabbi Elijah ben Shlomo Zalman of Vilnius (1720–97), known as the "Vilna Gaon," who strongly opposed the development of Hasidism in Eastern Europe.

the two Orthodox communities and he himself was seen by some congregants as “distant” from the local Jewish population (partially due to his continual commuting between Odessa and Jerusalem, where his family resided and the fact that his children did not attend Odessa’s education facilities which Baksht himself had built). As one of my informants put it, he was “serving rather than living with the Jewish community.” Others, however, admired Baksht for his long term commitment to the city illustrated in his personal investment and on-going development of Tikva’s programs. His dedicated followers described him as a “strong leader” and a “great teacher of traditions”.

In 1998, Shaya Gisser himself was succeeded by another Israeli rabbi, Avraham Wolf, who transformed the Shomrei Shabbos congregation by aligning it with the Chabad–Lubavitch Hasidic movement.¹²¹ When I asked observant Jews associated with Shaya about why and how he left Odessa, many indicated indirectly that he had had no choice. As one woman explained, “He could not compete financially with the money and influence of foreign donors and Israeli rabbis who had the resources and personnel to build up the infrastructure for Odessa’s observant Jews.” From what I was able to ascertain, Shaya Gisser was simply asked to hand over responsibilities to the newly appointed Israeli rabbi.¹²²

¹²¹ Chabad–Lubavitch is a transnational Hasidic movement, based in the United States, engaged in a worldwide outreach movement dispatching thousands of *shlihim* (emissaries) to major cities and some of the most remote places in the world. Fishkoff documents that more than 3,800 emissary couples are stationed in 45 US states and 61 foreign countries dedicated to bringing Jews back to Judaism (2003:10). In the FSU in particular, Chabad has become the dominant Jewish voice, “shaping the future of this newly emerging Jewish community in a way they have done nowhere else (Fishkoff 2003:8). Traditionally, Hasidism is a religious movement aimed at bringing Judaism to every man irrespective of his level of education and literacy. By contrast to text-centered and academic older forms of Orthodoxy, it emphasizes personal piety, mysticism and *mitzvot* (good deeds) judged as individual merits. Historically, it is associated with the teachings of Baal Shem Tov and originated in rural parts of Eastern Europe, especially Ukraine, in the 18th century.

¹²² I have made numerous unsuccessful efforts to meet Shaya Gisser through some of his old followers. As far as I know, he currently resides in Israel and continues to be involved in the education of Russian Jewry, primarily in Moscow. Among some of the Moscow-based foreign rabbis I met, he was described as “a character” and “a man of independent thinking.”



10 Main prayer hall of the Chabad Shomrei Shabbos synagogue during the ritual of *bris*

Backed by his foreign-based donors, and with the help of some ten Israeli religious families, Rabbi Wolf echoed Rabbi Baksht's initiatives by setting up parallel educational facilities and programs oriented toward raising a religious awareness among local Jews.

According to figures provided by the secretary of the Chabad synagogue, the congregation today consists of – depending on different ways of calculating the numbers – between 6,000 members (based on the number of subscribers to the Shomrei Shabbos newspaper) and 500–700 members (based on synagogue attendance on high holidays). Based on my own observation on occasional Friday visits, around 70 to 80 men and an average of 30 to 40 women would be present at the service. During the holidays, I observed an average of 250 to 300 people crowded into its gender-separated halls.

Wolf's community is usually regarded as "more relaxed,"¹²³ although no less Orthodox than the Tikva Or Sameach community. Rabbi Wolf is widely admired for being more open and "more involved" with the greater Jewish population than Rabbi Baksht. At the same time, Wolf and his wife, Chaya, are often criticized for being too socially active, not with the ordinary people but with the top city elite (potential donors or supporters). Vera, a middle-aged observant woman, described rabbi's conception of his role as more about "public relations" than religious services. "There is no feeling of sincerity in his services, just words." Other congregants regarded Wolf more highly, describing him as "sincere," "progressive," "approachable" and "assisting in important business matters" while still remaining a "credible spiritual leader."

Both Orthodox congregations were surrounded by cohorts of religious emissaries. As they acquired properties, bought cars and expanded their programs during the last few years, local gossip multiplied.¹²⁴ These acquisitions, deals and behavior were condemned in moral terms. Not once was it accepted that religious emissaries could legitimately be described as "managers" or "businessman" behaving as such. Discussing today's religious leadership, Vera explained that, although people were aware that fund-raising was an important element of sustaining the congregation, "someone else besides the rabbi should be allocated that task." Comparing today's religious scene to the time of Shaya Gisser, Maya noted, "When we came to Shaya we wanted to learn, we wanted to know ... There was a different sense as to why we were part of it. Now it is all about getting benefits, money, and meeting money." More pungently, Mendy described today's Jewish religious life as a "swamp," adding, "It

¹²³ I occasionally sighted women in traditionally inappropriate attire (such as trousers and revealing shirts or skirts) and also families driving to service on *Shabbat*. When I pointed this out, the response of one of my informants was, "Wolf just closes his eyes to this." Perhaps the more sincere explanation that Rabbi Wolf extended an open invitation for any Jew in the city, irrespective of their level of observance or appropriate dress, to attend his services and feel welcomed in his congregation also explains the acceptance of some of the violations in traditional practices conducted on *Shabbat*.

¹²⁴ A number of local Jews were disturbed by the fact that the Chabad rabbi drove an expensive car. I heard two students discussing this: one of the young boys claimed that the car was a present to the rabbi from one of his sponsors, to which his friend responded, "Yes, I know those types of gifts. Our rabbi [in Herson] also receives them."

presses on you, almost suffocates you.” When I tried to probe further, Mendy said, “They [the rabbis] set up an institution of Jewish life which in itself puts pressure on those involved to do things in a certain way. The institution of family, education”

Odessa also has a small and much less visible Reform congregation, which took me nearly a month to find, as most of the Jews I met early in my fieldwork had heard of it but never been there. When I did find the place, I was not surprised that others before me had not. Odessa's Temple Emanu-El is housed in a basement space. Faded letters spelling out *magazine* (store) are still visible on the outside façade of the building. Whereas the Chabad and the Litvak communities had managed to reclaim Odessa's historical synagogue buildings for their work, efforts by the Reform religious leader, Yulya Grisebshenko, to take over the building of the Brody Synagogue (the first Reform synagogue in Odessa and the Russian Empire established in 1841) have so far been unsuccessful due to insufficient funds for its renovation.

11 Receiving a new Torah scroll from an American delegation at Temple Emanu-El

However, it is not primarily because of its hidden location that most Jews in Odessa have not visited the Reform temple. Many disagree with the Reform ideology, while

others simply have no interest in religious life. Some religious Jews described the Reform movement as “a joke,” “easy Judaism, not real Judaism” and some associated it with fake mysticism. Rumors about Yulya not being Jewish were voiced to me on many occasions (see also Fishkoff 2004b). The spiritual leader, Yulya (as she is widely known), originally from Bryansk, a city on the Ukrainian–Russian border, claimed to have around 100 members in her community. Although I myself never saw more than 15 to 20 people attend Friday night events, during holiday celebrations these numbers doubled and even tripled. She has been officially performing the role of religious leader since 2001, when the congregation was founded with the backing of the World Union for Progressive Judaism, based in the United States.

Pre-Revolutionary Odessa was historically a stronghold of Reform Judaism, yet today the Reform movement represents the smallest segment of religiously affiliated Jews. Possibly due to its late arrival in post-Soviet Odessa (2001), lack of significant funding, less aggressive promotional tactics and weaker provision of services, programs and goods, Reform Judaism is not nearly as prominent in Odessa (or Ukraine generally) as is Orthodox Judaism.¹²⁵ When I spoke with her, Yulya believed that their Soviet upbringing and Orthodox indoctrination made many local Jews uncomfortable with a female Jewish leader acting in the role of rabbi. Certainly, some local Jews openly declared that having a female “rabbi” was a foreign concept to them, which made them feel uneasy. On a less doctrinal level, I found the Reform congregation not as well organized (in relation to their events and congregants) and infrastructurally less developed compared to Orthodox organizations in the city. To her own congregants, however, Yulya represented a “motherly figure.” Many of the members described her as “open” and “approachable,” “kind” and “spiritually energetic.” The fact that Yulya, unlike the two Israeli rabbis, spoke fluent Russian and conducted her services mainly in

¹²⁵ Describing the last ten years, Fishkoff notes that the Federation of Jewish Communities of the CIS (a Chabad umbrella organization responsible for 392 Jewish communities in the FSU) operates with a \$20 million annual budget, i.e., 20 times the money spent by the Reform movement (2003:14).

Russian, and usually accompanied by guitar music, made her congregants feel "comfortable" in a religious setting.

The Role of Religious Organizations

"How many synagogues does one Jew need? Three. One that is his, one that is not his and one that he will never go to."

A common joke that circulates among observant Jews in Odessa

Odessa is home to three Jewish religious congregations, as described above.¹²⁶

Relations among all three religious leaders are strained. Both Orthodox rabbis claim the status of Chief Rabbi of the city.¹²⁷ They interact on very few occasions and agree on little apart from their non-recognition of the Reform community. Aware of the current battles over Jewish leadership in the city, Yulya told me she tried to stay concentrated on her community and not get involved in Odessa's Jewish politics of authority. There is nothing traditionally Odessan in Jews adhering to different congregations and feeling themselves part of one particular synagogue and community. In Odessa, however, these emergent differences between Reform, Hasidic and Litvak orientations are very recent, products of the last ten-odd years of foreign intervention. Even so, the city does have a number of the so called "floaters,"¹²⁸ who attend services and programs at both Orthodox congregations, although far fewer float between Orthodox and Reform spheres.

Each of the three synagogues holds *Shabbat* services and celebrations of Jewish

¹²⁶ As of 1999, Ukraine had over 70 Orthodox and 15 Reform communities. It had 18 foreign Orthodox rabbis (from Israel and the United States) but not a single local rabbi in post (Zissels 1999:303). Describing the situation in Russia, Satanovsky (2009) notes that the majority of rabbis in Russian Jewish society are foreign and Orthodox. The lack of local candidates – and, equally, a system for their training – remains a serious problem within Russia's rabbinate. See <http://eajc.org/page34/news14038.html> (last accessed 11.24.2009).

¹²⁷ Each designated as such by a municipal department that has issued appropriate certificates and stamps (Gidwitz 1997).

¹²⁸ "Floaters" were also sometimes referred to as "prostitutes" for receiving benefits at both congregations.

holidays and life cycle rituals. They each sponsor their own youth clubs and a range of social activities and *Shabatons* (communal *Shabbat* ceremonies), usually organized on the former premises of Soviet-built retreat centers. Among the programs offered are Jewish summer camps, where subjects of Jewish history and traditions are taught in an informal manner as part of daily activities. Additionally, the two Orthodox synagogues each have their own syndicates of (female and male) schools, children's homes, a *heder* (for junior rabbinic study), a *yeshiva* (for senior rabbinic study), a *kollel* (postgraduate rabbinic study for married men), a *mikvah* (purifying bath) and a university whose curriculum includes a combination of religious and secular subjects. Other formal education programs, sponsored by STARS (Student Union of Torah for Russian speakers), are organized for Jewish youth either on the premises or in private homes of Israeli emissaries: STARS enrolment and attendance is encouraged by a monthly stipend of US\$75 paid to the students.¹²⁹ Both Orthodox communities publish a weekly newspaper in Russian, distributed free at the synagogue or through subscription, and sponsor an hour-long television program dedicated to Jewish lessons, which runs weekly on two different channels. They each have a website dedicated to their activity in the city (www.tikvaodessa.org; www.chabad.odessa.ua).

The programs of the Reform congregation are, as mentioned above, far less developed in Odessa. A recently opened kindergarten, located on the outskirts of the city, is the community's first attempt to organize a line of formal education facilities outside of the youth club and occasional classes of Judaism offered on the premises of the synagogue, annual camps and communal Shabbats (*Shabbatons*). The congregation also has a website (www.emanu-el.od.ua) which has recently been renovated, and serves as a platform for viewing photographs of congregants and events, connecting with the community's various supporters and as a tool for learning the history of Reform Judaism in Odessa. In addition to the other services supported by the religious

¹²⁹ Besides STARS, a smaller program, Neer Elef, has recently been organized, which instructs already observant families on Jewish laws at a deeper level. See <http://www.jewishstars.ru/contentManagement/about.asp> (last accessed 12.20. 2009).

communities, two kosher restaurants with adjacent kosher grocery stores, which carry Israeli and local products are recommended to local Jews. I was told that reduced-cost or sometimes cost-free catering for local newly observant Jews choosing kosher restaurants for life cycle celebrations was sometimes provided by the rabbis as a reward for their good deed. The local Hevrah Kadisha (burial society) affiliated with both the Orthodox communities owns its own plot of land, where only *halakhic* Jews are buried and funerals are performed and administered in accordance with traditional Jewish procedure.

The law of halakhah

Membership of the Orthodox community is strictly defined by the laws of the *halakhah*, which recognize a Jew as one born to a Jewish mother (or properly converted to Judaism). A Jew in the *halakhic* interpretation is a member of the Jewish faith and the Jewish people. Yet, as Mikhail Chlenov points out, the *halakhah* definition was virtually unknown in the Soviet Union where, for the most part, religion played little, if any, part in Jewish orientation and state-defined Jewish identity was as a secular nationality:

The new awareness of *halakhah* that developed in the Soviet Union in the late 1980s, as a result of migration, led to the creation of new terminology: "*halakhic* Jew," for those born of a Jewish mother and a non-Jewish father; "*non-halakhic* Jew," for those born of a Jewish father and a non-Jewish mother; and a "full Jew," for people born of two Jewish parents. (1994:133)¹³⁰

Due to the high percentage of intermarriage among Soviet Jews, the number of "full" Jews in relation to the overall Jewish population is relatively small (Gidwitz 2001:4).¹³¹

¹³⁰ In the Russian language, children of mixed (Jewish and non-Jewish) origin were referred to as *polukrovok* (male), *polukrovka* (female), which literally translates as half-blooded.

¹³¹ Gitelman notes that, in 1988, 48 percent of Soviet Jewish women and 58 percent of Jewish men married non-Jews. By 1996, the frequency of mixed marriages in Ukraine specifically was 81.6 percent for Jewish men and 73.7 percent for Jewish women (2009:258). In the Soviet Union, as Gitelman explains, interethnic marriages were presented in the media and the arts as a sign of progressiveness (2009:257). For further details on the subject of intermarriage among Soviet Jewry, see Altshuler (1998:7) and Tolts (1992).

As one of the Chief Rabbis of Odessa told me, "If you meet a Jew whose parents are both Jewish, it is probably an accident."¹³²

The introduction of a religiously derived Jewish identity by Odessa's Orthodox leadership has thus brought an unfamiliar twist to local perceptions of Jewishness, and a new sense of uncertainty. Many people's self-identification as Jewish is now under question or at least seen as requiring proof. Given previous state manipulation of ethnic, religious and national categories in the USSR, religious emissaries feel it necessary to check who is "really" Jewish. *Halakhic* status is usually affirmed by one's passport and birth certificate or the appropriate documents of one's mother or maternal grandmother, showing Jewish "nationality." Soviet-era passports are reviewed carefully to eliminate forged documents. Personal dossiers compiled by those who have no documentation at all (usually as a result of WWII events, including evacuation) are scrupulously checked and sometimes even sent to Israel for final consultation.

Many elderly informants spoke to me of their distaste at having to present their documents in order to prove they were Jews. Raisa, a woman in her eighties, described how angry this had made her feel: "They should be embarrassed to do this, knowing all that we lived through. Do they think they are more Jewish than us?" adding, "We never ask them for documentation." She was not alone in finding the process of identity checking "degrading."

However, Israeli emissaries insisted that such checks were essential and told me of cases where documents had been forged in applications to their schools and universities. In fact, such stories were often presented in a positive light and described as "the best advertisements for Jewish congregations." As one member of the Tikva

¹³² Intermarriage, mixed ancestry and the existence of non-halakhic Jews are of course widespread phenomena and not specific to Odessa. In the United States for instance intermarriage rates are near 47 percent (http://www.jewishfederations.org/local_includes/downloads/4606.pdf). Reform Judaism welcomes children of mixed marriages and non-Jewish spouses of affiliated Jewry, including where the mother is not Jewish and departs from the *halakha* in regarding them as Jews.

Or Sameach synagogue explained, "Back in the old days, people tried to forge their documents to hide their Jewish identity and now they forge them to create one." Documents showing one's Jewish descent are essential for emigration, children's admission to religious Jewish schools, religious life cycle ceremonies (marriage, circumcision, burial etc.) and many Jewish clubs, social and economic benefits, subsidized travel to Israel and more.

Although Israeli emissaries employed by the Orthodox congregations denied having *non-halakhic* students in their groups, at times claiming to be the only ones who did not, a few of my informants cited cases where *non-halakhic* students were admitted into Jewish religious schools and (the boys) even circumcised. While I myself never met anyone involved in such an operation, a number of my friends in Odessa recalled forged documents being submitted for admission to various Jewish summer camps that they had attended in their teens. Karina explained, "It used to be the case that you did not have to submit your actual passport for proof of identity. A photocopy was sufficient, until they realized that many people were writing "Jewish" under the heading "nationality," having masked their Russian, Ukrainian or other legal status. In response to my blatant curiosity, Karina said, "At that time [early 1990s] there was not much to do in Odessa and Jewish children came back [from camps] and raved about their experiences at camp, of course others wanted to go."

Services provided by religious organizations

Jewish schools are regarded by Jews and non-Jews alike as having a strong academic curriculum, with proper meals and pastoral care for their students. Similarly the Jewish universities are considered good academic institutions. Jewish summer camps are also attractive because of their extremely low cost and high level of organized activities, as well as the opportunity to encounter a foreign (usually Israeli) culture. Other resources provided by Jewish religious organizations go to meet daily needs of those who cannot otherwise secure them independently, offering subsidized food, medicine and homecare, which otherwise could not be guaranteed by the state. All

these highly valued amenities are conditional on membership of the relevant religious organization. For the middle and younger generations, privilege is embedded in rites of passage ceremonies and the teaching of a sacred history, Hebrew language and rituals, which are guaranteed to community members only. A sense of exclusivity is another “perk” that young people sometimes mentioned. Affordable, often cost-free, travel abroad (usually to Israel and sometimes the United States) is also considered a bonus.

Many of these benefits (although not travel) were previously part of the Soviet state welfare program, which unfortunately has not been fully replaced with a Ukrainian state system of social services, thus leaving many ex-Soviet citizens without essential or appropriate resources. Faith-based organizations (especially those linked to the West) have played a paramount role in this transition as they secure specific benefits for their congregants and a general sense security.¹³³ The level of support offered by any one congregation is of course directly linked to the prosperity of its donors and contingent on their philanthropic efforts across the globe.

One of the unfortunate by-products of this generous provision of resources to Jews under the auspices of international Jewish organizations is that it has arguably contributed to the new wave of anti-Jewish sentiment, and even grass roots anti-Semitic slurs. Evidently this is part of a wider phenomenon in which economic and social distinctions and imbalances within Odessan society are now demarcating ethnic differences and social hierarchies. I did myself occasionally hear non-Jewish Odessans complain about their Jewish neighbors receiving packages from Jewish centers – where no such benefits are available to them – and express envy of Jews’ travel and emigration opportunities, even the possibility of European or Israeli citizenship.¹³⁴ An important legacy from the Soviet era is the socialist assumption of social justice in

¹³³ See Caldwell (2008) for a comparable discussion of Christian-based welfare in the FSU.

¹³⁴ Similar attitudes are expressed toward ethnic Greeks and Germans in the FSU whose privilege is first and foremost defined by European citizenship which many ex-Soviet citizens cannot attain (Personal communication with Eftihia Voutira, 11/06/2010).

which the welfare system provided for all on equal terms (Kotkin 1995:152).

Consciously or not, this functions as a backdrop of expectations and everyday reality that conditions today's senses of inequality. What becomes apparent in analyzing the above examples (and other similar ones that I came across in my fieldwork) is that being a Jew has become a privileged status; no longer is it an unquestioned, undesirable identity that one has whether or not one wants it (Markowitz 1993:159).

Thus, if you are, first, accepted and, second, accepting of the values attached to being Jewish; you are, as my informants explained, "provided for."¹³⁵ On numerous occasions I heard Rabbi Wolf proclaim to his donors that there are no homeless people begging outside the synagogue, as had been, he recalled, the case in the 1990s and continues to be the case outside of many churches. Here in the synagogue, Wolf explained, "All those in need are taken care of." Based on the examples, I would be inclined to suggest that local Odessans of non-Jewish descent were not forging their documents for the sake of exploring Jewish life but, rather, to have access to all that has come to be guaranteed to Jews through the financing of the international Jewish organizations and donors whose resources have, in many ways, come to replace the long gone Soviet system of social welfare.¹³⁶

New Challenges to Jewish Identification

The influx of religious groups from abroad and their promotion of new (to Odessa) laws, ethnic boundaries and ideologies such as the *halakhah*, has resulted in new asymmetries and patterns of inclusion and exclusion among the local population, similar to those described by Mathijs Pelkmans in the territory of Kyrgyzstan.¹³⁷ The

¹³⁵ Other scholars of religious movements in the FSU have pointed out that, with the Christian and Islamic movements, the financial and material reward attached to conversions acts as a factor in religious affiliation (Pelkmans 2006a:36).

¹³⁶ Odessa's Jews also receive aid from a number of non religious organizations the funding from which is mainly provided by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (Joint).

¹³⁷ Pelkmans (2006a) details the arrival of numerous foreign Christian missionary movements in Kyrgyzstan since independence, creating a "religious market" where local Muslims and Christians of different dominations can choose between a range of patterns of observance and enjoy the benefits,

strict definitions enforced by Orthodox rabbis have sometimes excluded self-identified Jews and included those previously unaware of, or silenced about, their Jewish identity. For instance, some *non-halakhic* Jews who previously identified themselves as Jewish in accordance with their father's nationality, and were recognized as such by others and the state, are not recognized as Jews by the Orthodox religious community due to their missing maternal link.¹³⁸

Sasha, a young entrepreneur whom I met at the Chabad synagogue, told me of an incident where he was not allowed to put on *tefillin* (phylacteries) while his friends were called to the front of the synagogue to partake in the ritual. Sasha has always considered himself Jewish, based on the fact that he was raised as a Jew by his father and his other relatives. The fact that his mother is not Jewish was never raised as an issue in the household. Although he had been an active participant in the synagogue for years, he told me that he remained an outsider in the eyes of others, feeling more and more isolated as the Chabad community expanded their activities and he continued to remain on the fringes of group membership. Even among his peers, whom he regularly greeted inside and outside the synagogue premises, I heard comments confirming Sasha's suspicion of being looked at as a non-Jew. Describing his relationship with the rabbi, Sasha told me the following story:

including material rewards. As in Odessa, these processes have been greeted with mixed responses from locals and, specifically in the context of Kyrgyzstan, other dominant religions and press.

¹³⁸ Andrew Buckser presents a comparable scenario in Denmark where he notes that "some members [of the Jewish community], following Orthodox guidelines, insist that only the children of Jewish mothers or formal converts count as true Jews; some others, noting the prevalence of intermarriage, include children of Jewish fathers as well; and still others recognize self-identification, rather than descent, as the proper criterion for Jewishness...While some of these viewpoints have greater official standing than others- the Orthodox rabbi, for example, has the final word on official membership in the Community..." (1999:194). In Odessa, where high rates of intermarriage and the legacy of Soviet nationality policy (which recognized one as a Jew through either the maternal or the paternal line of descent) complicate boundaries of Jewish membership, the Reform approach to the question of who is a Jew opens possibilities of claiming Jewish identification through either line of descent. The open door policy practiced by Temple Emanu-El is captured in the slogan posted on their website, "If you are a Jew – come to us! If you are not quite a Jew – come to us! If You have not yet decided who You are – come to us!!!" (<http://www.emanu-el.od.ua>), thus clearly relaying its message of inclusivity for potential congregants.

I am very close to Wolf and I really respect him but certain things are not right. I know the synagogue recently formed a youth club, which they don't say is for *halakhic* Jews but it is exactly the point to separate them from the *non-halakhic* Jews so they can have pure Jewish marriages. Believe me, I know how it works. I know some of my friends asked if I could join the club and the rabbi said nothing positive in response. It hurts me. They see me there almost every Friday for *Shabbat* and the holidays and know everything I do for them. I know they are happy I am there but I now know my boundaries. I thought about *giur* [conversion] but I don't want to live a religious life ... I sin too much.

In her research on Bukharan Jews, Cooper (1998) documents a number of such "fragmented identities" in Uzbekistan, where it was common practice in cases of intermarriage to register the child according to the father's nationality. Such decisions, as Cooper notes, were influenced, first, by the notion that Islam (the major religion in Central Asia) is transmitted patrilineally and, second, by the fact that local Uzbeks follow patrilocal residential patterns. Consequently, a number of *non-halakhic* Jews in Uzbekistan are not recognized as being Jewish by the international emissaries who have come to replace the local Jewish leadership who have largely emigrated.

Cooper's ethnography documents some of the routine problems faced by her informants in identifying themselves and others as Jews based on the juxtaposition of old and new systems of identification. Yura is a young boy who was born to a Jewish father and a non-Jewish mother. His parents were married in a Jewish wedding in the Soviet Union, which Yura's mother claimed to have served as her official "conversion" to Judaism. He was circumcised and raised with an awareness of being Jewish, including taking part in some Jewish practices. When Yura decided to make a commitment to his Jewish girlfriend, Diana, he was not recognized as Jewish by the local Chabad rabbi, who refused to conduct their wedding; nor was his mother's Soviet conversion considered valid. While Cooper does not recount how the story ends, she lays out some of the emotional trauma of being denied one's self-identification just at the moment when one is looking to confirm it. In Uzbekistan, as in Odessa, you can no longer respond to the question "Are you Jewish?" with a simple "yes" or "no." Now the answer is, "It depends on who you ask" (Cooper 1998:34).

In an earlier study of an immigrant enclave of Soviet Jews in Brighton Beach, New York, Markowitz also describes cases where young boys were denied the procedure of *bris* (circumcision)¹³⁹ as a result of genealogical tracking conducted by the American rabbis. She writes, "Boys who had considered themselves Jewish, and were considered Jewish in their native country, were told that they are, in fact, not Jews because of intermarriage a generation or two ago" (1993:159). With sincere compassion for these newly arrived immigrants and a blatant distaste for the attitude of the rabbis who "were happy to have caught forgeries," Markowitz describes these cases as truly upsetting, "leaving Soviet Jews with ambivalent feelings about their Jewish identity" (personal correspondence April 2004).

Unlike the Bukharan Jews in Uzbekistan described by Cooper, my informants did not identify any specific issues around mixed marriages involving rigid structures for transmission of ethnic, national, or religious identity. However, a number of mixed families where the mother was not Jewish explained that they saw raising and registering their children Jewish as a symbol of respect for the father and his family history. Margarita, a Russian professor at Odessa University, told me that all three of her boys were given their Jewish father's surname and at the age of 16 they had Jewish nationality on official state documents. "I simply could not do otherwise," Margarita commented. "We lived with my husband's family and I wanted to show my

¹³⁹ The Jewish circumcision ritual traditionally conducted on the eighth day after birth as a physical marker of one's covenant with God and the Jewish people. Some rabbinic authorities would argue that males, although born of Jewish mothers, are not considered fully Jewish if they remain uncircumcised. In the USSR, circumcision was viewed in official and "cultured" circles as a "barbaric" and "savage" practice performed by uncivilized people, and many Jewish parents, rather than marking their boys as different and adding to the indignity of their Jewish identity, simply did not have this rite performed (Markowitz 1993:158; for Islamic parallels in southern Kyrgyzstan, see McBrien 2006:50). Some Jews, after leaving the Soviet Union, have chosen to undergo this procedure at various ages. I have met a number of men who have been circumcised abroad or in their native cities in order to become "proper Jews." Such rituals were highly valued by community leaders and often publicly discussed and celebrated as one's rebirth as a Jew. I have, however, also come across cases where the ritual was regarded as a highly private matter and no one (including the parents) was invited to participate in the celebration.

respect to them – they were all Jewish.” I was told by one woman that the act of marrying someone Jewish, meant you were also seen as a Jew in the eyes of others.

However, mixed marriages aside, the issues identified by Cooper and Markowitz about recognition and confirmation of one's Jewishness were also problematically present in my field site, as indicated above. In some cases, acts of rejection turned Jews away from Jewish life altogether, while in others disappointment led to a certain holding back of loyalty and trust – as was the case with Sasha. The option of *giur* was dismissed by the majority of *non-halakhic* Jews: the process was too difficult and the expectation of full observance during and after the *giur* many found unrealistic in their present family and life settings.¹⁴⁰ But for a very few Jews I met, it had served as a solution.

The popularizing of the *halakhah* has not only excluded newly defined “outsiders”: the other side is new inclusions. A number of Jews who previously did not recognize or acknowledge themselves as such, or who did not know of their Jewish roots, had now entered into the realm of Jewish activity. Liza, a woman I met at Migdal, told me that, when she was growing up, she did not know that she herself was Jewish. Her family was mixed – Russian, Ukrainian and Jewish. Her maternal grandmother, whom she had thought of as her only Jewish link, died before she was born, leaving very little for

¹⁴⁰ In the FSU, the Orthodox conversion process usually takes one to two years and entails strict observance of the Jewish commandments, learning an array of Jewish subjects, including Jewish history, the Hebrew language, prayers, rituals, the Jewish calendar etc. For men, the process also involves circumcision. As conversion is not an aim of the Jewish religion, converts are initially discouraged by rabbis in order to test the sincerity of their motives and applications are regularly denied on the basis of wrong motives (for example, wanting to marry a Jewish partner). Potential converts are also haunted by the internalized fear of never being accepted as full-fledged Jews even after the process of *giur*, as religious leaders constantly challenge one another on the legitimacy of conversions. Adding to the sense of anxiety, Israel has recently limited their list of rabbis whose *giur* is accepted as legitimate, while the Israeli rabbinical court has revoked a number of *giurs* in Israel. See [http://jewishtimes.com/index.php/jewishtimes/news/it/israel news/israeli court revokes conversion/](http://jewishtimes.com/index.php/jewishtimes/news/it/israel%20news/israeli%20court%20revokes%20conversion/) (last accessed 11.22.2009). Conversion classes were also offered through the Reform congregation but few members of the congregation (possibly because they already felt included without the formality of conversion) partook in the *giur* course. Unlike the Orthodox setting, Yulia did not stress the need for strict observance and did not try to discourage potential converts. During my time she was using weekly study groups as a means to teach interested individuals about Judaism within the framework of Reform ideology.

her mother or herself to recall of their Jewishness. "My mother," Liza explained, "does not remember anything of Jewish religion or traditions in her house – possibly because my grandmother was a revolutionary activist and very little, if anything, would have been observed among her close circles of family and friends." The only thing her mother remembers is that her mother (Liza's grandmother) spoke Yiddish to her neighbor when she did not want others in her courtyard to understand. "That was the only time my mother heard this foreign [to her] language." Liza cited a conversation she had had with Anna Misuk, a local historian of Jewish Odessa, that she thought indicated that her grandmother's attitude was typical of the general mood of the Jewish population after WWII, "to not teach your children Yiddish in order to protect them; to give them less of a chance to affirm their Jewishness in public." Liza's mother only knew a few words of Yiddish, which she managed to grasp from overhearing her mother's "secret" conversations.

Growing up with her paternal grandmother, Liza was baptized, registered as a Ukrainian in her passport and raised in an environment of Slavic traditions. Some years after the fall of the Soviet Union, her mother started working as an art teacher at Migdal, where, in her weekly classes on Jewish art, she creatively re-created a world of which she had little direct knowledge. On her mother's recommendation Liza sent her son, Keril, to the Chabad Jewish school and Migdal's after school program. This step in turn led Liza to join the family club that met at Migdal every Sunday, where she socialized ever more frequently with other affiliated parents. Through her son's education Liza was also exposed to the Jewish calendar and the significance of the major historical and biblical dates, as covered by Keril's curriculum. In these ways, her son's education and the knowledge it gave her of "proper" Jewish ways swayed her to

change her own orientation. Not long before I left, Liza *kashered*¹⁴¹ her kitchen and started observing the *halakhic* dietary laws.

Among my informants who had recently learned of their Jewish family roots, their initial inquiry was most often prompted by possible migration, membership in a Jewish organization, or possible job at a Jewish institution where one was directly questioned about one's Jewish connection.¹⁴² Vika, a 16-year-old student at the Chabad girls' school, told me her story:

My aunt married a Jewish man and they decided to emigrate to Israel. During the visa application process she needed to present her documents. She went to the archives to try to find something. As it turns out, we are actually Jews – Polish Jews! My ancestors were actually from a family of rabbis, they were religious. Close to that time, my mother was looking for a job and she saw a posting for an opening at the Jewish kindergarten. Seeing the care provided for the Jewish children, she transferred me to the Jewish school.

For Vika, this family discovery and her mother's initial choice to enroll her in a Jewish school led her to pursue Jewish religious education further and then to become partially observant. However, Vika's mother did not follow in her daughter's footsteps. Vika suggested that this was mainly because her father was not Jewish and also a non believer.

Zionist Organizations and the Law of Return

While the *halakhah* does not dictate inclusion in non-Orthodox communities, it remains an issue addressed by internal politics. The Reform community has a more permissive set of criteria for being recognized as a Jew, while Israeli-oriented organizations such as Sokhnut, the Israeli Cultural Centre and programs funded by

¹⁴¹ *Kashering* one's kitchen entails a process of intense cleaning and then purging with boiling water and other heat sources, which, according to the Jewish law, purifies dishes, pots, electrical appliances etc. of all traces of previous non-kosher contamination.

¹⁴² I do not want to imply that only Jews were hired by Jewish organizations. In fact, the opposite was true: many non-Jews worked in circles of Jewish activity and sometimes even outnumbered Jewish members (as was the case at the Israeli Cultural Center).

Joint and World ORT draw their boundaries in accordance with the criteria for immigration to Israel founded on the Law of Return. Such individuals are regarded by Zionist organizations as Jewish (or, loosely put, at least Jewish enough to live in Israel) even if they are denied Jewish identification by the religious rules of the *halakhah*. Law of Return Jews, as they have come to be referred to in the FSU, include those persons who have a Jewish parent or grandparent on either line of descent, and not necessarily those born to a Jewish mother.¹⁴³ Naturally, non-Orthodox organizations include a much larger pool of Odessans who, despite the variety of their relation to Jewishness, are able to participate in the city's Jewish life and are regarded as potential Israeli citizens. In the context of Zionist ideology, one's connection to Jewishness is first and foremost understood as a relationship with the land of Israel, expressed most vividly in the act of *aliyah*. For the most part, publicizing immigration rights has been carried out by the immense outreach program of Sokhnut, whose primary mission is to connect, or as its leadership states, "reconnect," local Jews to Israel. The right to immigrate to Israel guaranteed to Jews through the 1950 Law of Return reaffirmed their status as living in the Diaspora and theoretically confirms their status as a Diaspora (which in the Zionist ideology is linked to the land of Israel). The Diaspora dialogue supported by Sokhnut thus underscores the implicit assumption about the correspondence between a people and a territory, where Israel is assumed to be the home of the Jews or in the words of Voutira, a "*proper place for a people*" (Voutira 2006:380 emphasis in the original). Israel is not alone in offering such

¹⁴³ The Law of Return 1950 simply states (s. 1): "Every Jew has the right to immigrate to the country," leaving the word "Jew" undefined. In 1970, the Law of Return was amended, recognizing as a Jew, for purposes of Immigration, any person who was born of a Jewish mother, or has converted to Judaism (whether through an Orthodox or other process is not specified), and is not a member of another religion. Further, the amended law granted the right to immigrate also to the children and grandchildren of a Jew; to the non-Jewish spouses of Jews; to the non-Jewish spouses of children of Jews; and the non-Jewish spouses of non-Jewish grandchildren of Jews. "The purpose of this amendment is to ensure the unity of families, where intermarriage had occurred; it does not apply to persons who had been Jews and had voluntarily changed their religion." There are other grounds for refusing applications for immigration, e.g. concerning criminality, health and national security. All immigrants admitted under the Law of Return are normally granted Israeli citizenship. Israeli Ministry for Foreign Affairs: <http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Facts+About+Israel/State>.

"ancestral" rights. The legal recognition of Diaspora Jews makes Jews comparable to other "non-native" Russian groups (Greeks, Germans and Poles) who can exercise the right to return to their ancestral homeland and gain an alternative citizenship, a much sought after resource (Voutira 2006:393). Among non-Jews in Odessa, I myself did not come across anyone seeking to marry a Jew in order to leave Ukraine but many of my friends told me that in the late 1980s and early 1990s this was a common phenomenon. While Germany, Greece and Poland welcome back their diasporized groups, no country's efforts to regroup its "native" population can compare to Israel, where numbers of Jewish Israelis are crucial in the realm of politics, economics and security of the state, where they serve the important task of preserving the Jewish majority over the fast-growing Arab population (Fialkova and Yelenevskaya 2007:3).¹⁴⁴

Today, when emigration to Israel from Odessa has dwindled,¹⁴⁵ the local Sokhnut centers around Ukraine continue to operate, albeit in smaller numbers and mainly as information centers publicizing various study abroad, travel and internship programs. Among the most popular projects organized through Sokhnut is Taglit.¹⁴⁶ As one of Sokhnut's representatives explained, "Our organization used to concentrate on *aliyah* efforts and now we are faced with another challenge in teaching people about Israel, wherever they are in the world."

¹⁴⁴ It is a well known fact that many of the immigrants from the FSU are not considered Jewish either in *halakhic* terms or Israeli state immigration law and, indeed many are not Jewish on any criteria (e.g. spouse of a Jew). Concerns about the overwhelming mass of "non-Jewish Russians" have been expressed by local politicians, members of the religious *bet din* (rabbinic law court) and some ordinary Israeli citizens, who see the 1970 amendments to the Law of Return and nationality law as flawed legislation, too open in its parameters, especially in the consequent granting of citizenship. Negative stereotypes of Russian Jews as alcoholics, Mafiosi, prostitutes and even Bolsheviks (see Lemish 2000) endlessly circulate in Informal and formal settings of Israeli media, press and dialogue (Fialkova and Yelenevskaya 2007:5).

¹⁴⁵ According to the Ministry of Absorption of Immigration in Israel, 93 people immigrated to Israel from Odessa in 2006. Compare the high figures of 6,703 in 1990 and 3,294 in 1991. (Material emailed to me upon request by The Information Sector of the FSU Office of JAFI).

¹⁴⁶ Taglit Birthright Israel, otherwise known as Birthright, is a program that organizes free 13-day trips to Israel for young people aged 18–26 to introduce them to Israeli life and culture.

Odessa's Sokhnut currently has five Israeli emissaries who, with the help of local personnel, organize a students' club, Hebrew lessons, and other cultural groups such as a choir. Emissaries often take two-year posts and return to Israel once their assignment is completed. They are themselves sometimes emigrants from the FSU who permanently reside in Israel but return to their native cities or the region on work assignments.

Sokhnut also sponsors a number of summer camps, teaching youth about their previously unknown homeland through music, food, traditions and history. Israeli flags decorate the premises of such retreat centers while Israeli teachers trained by the organization re-create a sense of belonging among those who have the right to belong. It is a common phenomenon for active participants in Sokhnut who have recently made *aliyah* to return as teachers for summer camps. There are also a number who have long been affiliated with the center, working as local teachers or leaders of small collectives. Some of them told me they experienced a sense of guilt when telling others to go while not making the move themselves. Diana, a leader of one of the Sokhnut's sponsored programs told me, "It just looks bad to work for a Zionist organization for so long and not move there." While Diana toyed with the idea of short- or long-term relocation to Israel, her father's bad health and her career as a translator for the European Commission were among the many reasons she gave me for staying in Odessa, whenever the topic of Israel and *aliyah* arose. Diana's choice to remain in Odessa indicated her ability to balance the Zionist narrative in relation to her other loyalties to family and work.

Those who had spent some time in Israel and were aware that life there presented hardships not mentioned in Sokhnut's teaching and preaching sometimes expressed guilt and discomfort at taking part in what they often called "brain washing." When I asked Ira, a Russian-speaking Israeli who used to work at the Kiev branch of Sokhnut, and had made *aliyah* five years earlier, what she meant by "brain washing," she answered:

They would tell you that everyone is waiting for you there. That life is great and that you'll have a beautiful future there. They did not tell you about the problems and the issues one could have ... Most of them have never been to Israel or even abroad. After some years of sending off students I felt that I simply could not stay any longer.

Ira, like many others who had left their families to pursue an idealized Zionist calling, was quite cynical about Sokhnut's activities. The painted "gold mountains" were never to be seen, the beautiful life described never to be experienced. Their experiences of living in Israel had led them to an interpretation of Israel as a place of Jewish belonging quite different from that taught within the walls of Sokhnut. A number of such disenchanted young people chose return migration (see Chapter 6) while others have successfully built new, more realistic, attachments to their new home, re-scaled by contrast to their earlier Zionist zeal.

Sokhnut's activity was widely criticized by many informants for misleading people and encouraging them to emigrate with false illusions of what life in Israel entails, especially for those without the maternal Jewish link, who have problems with marriage, for example. *Aliyah* in practice proved far more problematic than the picture presented by Sokhnut and Israeli promotional material.¹⁴⁷ Nonetheless, many valued the fact that emigration remained an option: it provided a sense of security in case things were to take a turn for the worse in Ukraine.

Community Building: The American Dream

While religious and Zionist organizations each have their own agendas and modes invoking Jewish expression, other initiatives in Odessa are broader "community building" projects endorsed by US philanthropy. They promote a more open approach to Jewish participation (based on a less rigid structure of religiosity and Zionism) but, in

¹⁴⁷ "Repatriates" are treated differently by receiving countries than refugees and "are expected to integrate rapidly and easily due to their common ethnic and cultural roots" (Fialkova and Yelenevskaya 2007:1). Yet, the assumption that Jews would integrate more easily in Israel than other destinations has been challenged by empirical studies that show that Jews coming to Israel often experience many of the same issues as Jews emigrating to other countries (Shuval and Leshem 1998; Voutira 2006).

encouraging Jews, on the basis of being Jewish, to socialize with other Jews, may function to separate them from others. Structures of American-style Jewish communities, sponsored mostly by Reform American Jewry on the model of the Jewish Community Center pioneered by a New York “flagship” and now copied more widely across the United States, have also been exported to the FSU.¹⁴⁸ Such initiatives are yet another way by which foreign Jewish efforts direct local post-Soviet development and present new values to its active Jewish population.

In the summer of 2006, I accepted an invitation to attend a focus group organized by the American-funded organization, Joint, to discuss the future of the newly built \$4 million Jewish community center in Odessa, now officially named the Jewish Community Campus, “Beit Grand.” I must add that, although the building had already been constructed and had even been used on a few occasions when the sponsors came to commemorate their investments, it did not function on a daily basis during the time of my fieldwork.

¹⁴⁸ The JCC offers a wide range of services, resources and recreational programs for Jewish people of all ages and backgrounds. Members of the JCC can enjoy the benefits of Hebrew classes, lectures, films, athletic programs and – most important – communicate and interact with other Jews. See Aviv and Shneer (2005:164–171) for a description of JCC’s goals, functions and history in the USA.



12 Jewish Community Campus, "Beit Grand"

At the time of the focus group there was no consensus among local program leaders about what function this Community Campus was to serve at all and who exactly needed such a "monster" of an institution. For Joint, the main aim of the focus group was to understand what local Jews would want this building to represent and include in its agenda. The opening question posed by the interviewer to myself and the five others in the room, was: "What reaction would you have to a place called The Jewish Cultural Center?"

Katya, a 26-year-old architect, thought such a title sounded rather "closed" and in that sense similar to the rest of the existing Jewish organizations in the city. The fact that one had to present documents of Jewish descent to join, Katya explained, explicitly made these organizations for Jews. To someone else's response that there are non-Jews who participate in Jewish organizations, Katya commented, "Yes, but how many?" Dasha, Katya's room-mate, of Russian descent, said she, as someone who was not Jewish, would gladly participate in Jewish activities. She said that the few events she had attended with Katya were "interesting" and "cool." That said, she did agree

that, in certain ceremonies and discussions related to free travel to Israel (granted only to those recognized under the Law of Return), she felt left out.

Katya observed that, although some non-Jewish Odessans are familiar with and welcoming of Jewish activities in the city, they are in the minority. Most of the population still feels that Jewish centers serve only the interests of Jews. Having an expensive Jewish center in the middle of the city would significantly raise anti-Jewish sentiment. Although most participants agreed that Odessa was not an anti-Semitic city by any means, it was also a city that had never stressed any sort of ethnic purity.

Alex, a 23-year-old IT specialist, said he did not even know which of his friends were Jewish and, although he was Jewish, he did not feel it necessary to declare this fact to everyone around. "But if I told my friends, 'Let's go to the Jewish Cultural Center,'" Alex continued, "we would all be wondering if we or the others were Jewish and what that meant." According to Alex, centers as such created divisions among people and posed questions about "who you are, and with whom you are, based just on your nationality rather than your interests."

Following a short discussion, another question was put on the table: "How would you feel about the integration of non-Jews in such an organization?" Here everyone agreed that the center should be open to non-Jews but at the same time no one could really figure out how such a center should regulate its membership or what non-Jews would find attractive in the programs offered. Katya and Alex once again brought up the issue of separating activities and people into the bracket of "Jewish," and the way this would increase social divisions. All of the participants agreed that, although there were Romanian, Greek, German, French and English cultural centers operating in the city, and they are open to all, not just to Romanians etc., having a Jewish cultural center would mean something different. Yet no one could really explain why. As the official name of this institution was still undecided, some participants suggested the name Israeli cultural Center. David, a 26-year-old observant Jew who lives in Jerusalem and was at that time visiting his family in Odessa, responded, "There is

already an Israeli Cultural Center in the city and this project would be a Jewish center, not an Israeli one.”

After the interview, I managed to catch up with David, who had left the meeting in a rather disdainful manner, making it clear that he felt at odds with the rest of the group. He explained that he was not used to hearing Jews being so self-critical about their own culture. “Not that I would be supportive of a right-wing organization, don’t get me wrong, but I am a religious person and so for me a religious organization is a natural part of life.” I realized that David did not want to continue the conversation and so we switched topic completely for the remainder of our stroll.

Beyond this focus group, I heard a great deal of discussion among various members of Odessa’s Jewry about this new house of Jewish life. Some informants believed that many local Joint workers had got rich on this project by pocketing investors’ money. Others said that the building is “twice as large as the Jewish population itself,” commenting on the unnecessarily large building or its redundancy since the city already had its own local Jewish center, Migdal. Leaders of local programs complained about sharing their territory with commercial businesses (which were to rent spaces in the building in order to cover base costs), while potential future participants were simply outraged at the prices of the offered programs. One visitor expressed her shock at learning that employees of this new organization did not know the location of the Museum of History of Odessa Jews, which was on the same street, directly opposite the new center. However, among the wider Jewish population, there were questions more fundamental in nature – what would another Jewish center communicate to local Jews about their commonalities and differences?

It is clear from the focus group discussion that in many instances, Jews such as Alex simply do not see an added value in investing in any new centers of Jewish activity. Others feel that funds allocated by foreign donors and used to promote organized programs of Jewish activities and events do not necessarily help Jews in more practical matters. Leaders of locally organized and initiated programs such as Migdal struggled

with the foreign control regulations in their budget and agenda. To others, current projects lacked a connection with Odessa as a place and its values of diversity in Jewish practice and close interethnic relations. Because so many families in the city are of mixed origin, projects of Jewish activity also need to be sensitive to the role of non-Jews in Jewish institutions.

Conclusion: Revival and Fragmentation

Processes of ethnic, religious and cultural makeover, similar to what is occurring in Odessa, are often referred to, in academic literature and by activists, as revivals. The term assumes that what is being revived was, in fact, previously part of the cultural milieu of the population; in other words, that it is actually a new vitalization, the reproduction of an old phenomenon. The process of revival implies historical roots that can grow and be nourished; it is said to rejuvenate and restore the forgotten and abandoned elements of life; returning to "traditions." Yet, in many instances, ethnic, national and religious revival includes significant innovation and new inventions rather than a return to a past. As Broz puts it, revival "entails utilizing the past to advocate a particular vision of the future" (2009:24).¹⁴⁹ Even if there are plausible connections to the past, a revival, from this perspective, may still be interrogated as to the "vision of the future" that it is promoting.

It is important to appreciate that Odessa, historically an international port, has had a multi-ethnic and multi-confessional population from its early days until the beginning of the Soviet regime. According to the 1897 census, the city was home to speakers of some 55 languages, who came from over 30 countries and adhered to a wide variety of religious beliefs (Herlihy 1986:241–243). Equally, the city's Jewish population has a long history of exposure to competing ideologies and external points of reference. As

¹⁴⁹ Describing adherents of Buddhism, adopting a revivalist stance in Altai (south-west Siberia) Broz notes that they "emphasize the cultural proximity [referring to Mongolia and Tuva] and historical influence of Buddhism" on Altaian culture as they "claim to be dusting down a well-preserved Altaian tradition rather than proposing something new" (2009:24).

Klier highlights, "Odessa was a town without 'native' Jewish traditions, where new Jewish traditions had to be created" (2002:175). At the beginning of the 19th century newly arrived Jews, mostly from Germany and Austrian Galicia as well as newcomers from other areas of the Pale, were, indeed, instrumental in setting up Odessa's most influential religious congregations (see Chapter 1). From Zipperstein (1986) we also learn that Odessa's Jewish affairs from 1860 to 1888 were for the most part controlled by the city's Chief Rabbi, Aryeh Schwabacher, a German Jew who did not speak Russian or Yiddish. So, in this respect, one could say that the current wave of revival is, indeed, replicating a tradition – a 'tradition' of external interventions that Odessa's Jewry also experienced historically. In this frame of reference, today's processes of building up Odessa's Jewish life, which are based on various new-to-Odessa, models of Jewish identification are comparable.

Among some local and newly arrived Jews there is a sentiment that Odessa's rich Jewish history makes the city particularly open to the current revival. Many Jewish leaders and activists involved in organized Jewish life actually envision themselves as actively rebuilding the lost and forgotten world of pre-Soviet Odessan Jewry. After all, 19th century Odessa was home to a number of vibrant traditional communities including the large congregation of the *Glavnaya* (Main) Synagogue and over 70 smaller prayer houses including followers of Hasidism. The city was famous for its impressive Reform congregation and served as a center of Zionist activity, Jewish press, Jewish education and Jewish philanthropy (see Chapter 1). Today some of this activity has been reinstated in the city through the efforts of local and foreign Jews and a number of Odessa's current organizations even appear with their pre-revolutionary names including the Jewish Publishing House Moria, the Jewish sport community Makkabi and the Jewish literary club *Beseda* (Conversation). But is there a more basic sense in which current Odessan religious movements can claim to be a revival?

What makes the current revival peculiar is that many of the new organizations can hardly be described as historically Odessan. The Soviet system destroyed pre-Revolutionary Odessan Jewish institutions: in this sense there are little roots left to

revitalize. Equally, as has been shown, the Soviet era produced secular rather than religious markers of Jewish identity and the current wave of religiosity is alien “for some Odessan Jews who grew up in the Soviet era and who did not emigrate”; for them “the deeply religious communal life that is becoming increasingly dominant is in fact foreign to the city and to their own idea of what it means to be Jewish” (Richardson 2008:189). The relatively weak status of Odessa’s Reform Jews today and the dominant position of the two Orthodox congregations, especially the stronghold of Chabad Lubavitch in the city,¹⁵⁰ “is an ironic renewal of Hasidism in a city that was always better known as a center for liberal Jewish traditions”.¹⁵¹ Thus, it can be argued, that present-day missions of world Jewry are teaching and creating variants of their own understandings of Jewishness and not necessarily recreating those locally recognized as Odessan.¹⁵²

Mathijs Pelkmans’ edited volume *Conversion After Socialism*, focused predominantly on Christian and Muslim conversions, challenges the “problematic notion that religious life after socialism can be characterized as a *revival* of repressed religious tradition”(Pelkmans 2009:2). As Pelkmans, rightly points out, “Religion served new needs and was linked to new imaginaries” (2009:2).

¹⁵⁰ It is also important to note that Hasidism (specifically Chabad) and the Litvak movement have undergone tremendous change throughout the last two centuries and can hardly be compared to their earlier representatives in the city.

¹⁵¹ http://epyc.yivo.org/content/19_3.php. While Hasidic *tsadikim* (righteous religious leaders) did periodically visit the city and had a following (Klier 2002:173, see also Zipperstein 104-105), 19th-century Orthodox leaders acknowledged the general indifference to religion among the city’s Jews as they “claimed that the fires of Gehenna burned seven miles around Odessa” (Klier 2002:173).

¹⁵² I am aware that the Jewish population in Odessa is by no means undivided in their views on developments said to represent them or in their understandings of what is recognized as “Odessan” today. Indeed, it is questionable how far one can generalize about any continuing Soviet imprint on the thought and behavior of Odessa’s Jews, if talking about the youth and children who have grown up influenced not only by the history and experience of their parents and grandparents but also amidst new trends of post-Soviet culture. As Horwitz notes, “[t]he growth of at least two generations of Jewish youth who have experienced open celebrations of Jewish holidays, attendance at Jewish schools, and an environment of open, public Jewish activity has produced a Jewish youth quite different in attitudes and sensibilities from its parents (Horowitz 2003:124).

In this chapter I have introduced the various Jewish organizations that have been operating in Odessa since the fall of the USSR, including their leaders, laws and ideologies. This and the other chapters in Parts II and III document the process of Jewish revival, as envisioned by Jewish activists and experienced by local Jewry. Given the assumption of American and Israeli initiatives that, in the Soviet Union, Jews were actively seeking to reconnect to Jewish life but were prevented from doing so by Soviet repression – the rationale of their mission of restoring their lost Jewishness – I have tried to work backwards to understand what local Jews actually want and the relationship between local needs and foreign delivery. Here I have presented an initial picture of the various local and international initiatives where the identification of, and association with, Jewishness is taught. I have also included an indication of local – mixed – responses to these institutions to the new voices of authority that they install and their set parameters of recognizing Jews. My belief is that contestations such as those described in this chapter are connected to the larger process of cultural transformation in Odessa (and elsewhere in the FSU). Ethnic, religious and national identities are sites where new systems of meaning are pitted against existing rubrics of moral standing, solidarity and material wealth derived from the specific history of Soviet socialization. In the case of Odessa, however, the local cosmopolitan characteristics of the city, including its Jewishness, also play a role in the negotiation of current values, practices and orientations.

Initiatives of international emissaries can be described as successful in constructing several Jewish communities, and at the same time dividing them, along ideologies implanted from abroad. The new borders of organized Jewish life are defined by introduced laws such as the *halakhah* and the Law of Return which, for most part, were unknown or inactive among the majority of Soviet Jews due to their isolation from larger world affairs and high level of assimilation during the Soviet era. As discussed above, the circumstances of these new legal bonds – which have displaced the previous system of Jewish identification – constitute a challenge for those previously recognized as Jews, while at the same time offering some allure for other,

new-found, Jews. Meanwhile, foreign investments, together with post-Soviet developments in Ukraine, have, taken together, transformed Jewishness into a positive and privileged social status, whose sense of exclusivity is felt and judged by the larger Odessan inhabitants.

In the next chapter I focus specifically on the influences of Judaism as a religious system of beliefs, values and practices that has been introduced to Odessa's Jews in the aftermath of state socialism and internalized in a variety of ways.

Chapter 4

From *Evrei* to *Iudei*:

Turning or Returning to Faith?

Introduction

In Ukraine, as elsewhere in the FSU, the post-1991 period of sudden political reform, widespread social change and extensive moral questioning led to seismic shifts in the post-Soviet religious landscape (Wanner 2007b:1). “Religious revival” has been observed in many communities across the former Soviet territory where religious practice was previously banned or isolated from the public realm (see Hann 2006; McBrien and Pelkmans 2008; Pelkmans 2006; Wanner 2007a, b; Friedgut 2007). This chapter, focusing on individuals’ varied motivations, practices and pathways, will closely examine the extent to which Judaism as a religion had become embedded as one (but only one) of the defining features of Jewish identity in Odessa since the dissolution of the Soviet regime, and the variety of ways it was practiced and experienced.

As in the rest of the FSU, Odessa’s fully observant Jewish population constituted a minority of the city’s Jewish population, which included Jews who regarded themselves as secular or only partially observant. Typically, the newly observant Jews I met in Odessa did not grow up with religion in their homes:¹⁵³ unlike most Jewish religious families outside the FSU, they were not born into a world defined by religion. Some could relate to stories told to them by their parents or grandparents of a religious Jewish life that they themselves had never witnessed firsthand; others had no prior knowledge or no opportunity to ask. Most of the newly observant Jews in

¹⁵³ This is also true of the greater ex-Soviet Jewish population, the majority of whom were not affiliated with Judaism as a religion during Soviet rule (Ryvkina 2005:143).

Odessa had turned to Judaism because of interactions with Jewish activists and organizations or as a result of personal relations with an observant Jew and not as a way to return to their familial roots.¹⁵⁴ While I was told that there were those “brave” Jews who had observed “something” in Soviet Odessa, I myself did not meet anyone who had, even among the elderly population. This can possibly be explained by the fact that many of those Jews had emigrated to Israel, the United States or Europe, fearing a real threat to their life or suffering severe anxiety under Soviet repressions.¹⁵⁵

Given the historical circumstances of Soviet Jewry, many individuals and families who have since then made a covenant with Jewish beliefs were regularly exposed to the pressures of secular Soviet culture that still prevails in Odessan patterns of socialization, intermarriage and cultural assimilation. This chapter will examine the dynamics of the relationships of observant Jews with their non-observant families and friends who stood witness to their new lifestyle.

My material illustrates that religious practices were not envisaged by observant Jews as “returning” to a previously abandoned family practice as assumed in the concept of *ba'al teshuvah* and often highlighted by religious community leaders. Rather, a decision to turn to faith was perceived as a new pattern of life that installed previously unfamiliar values and meanings through everyday practices of being Jewish. Similar to the young Jews in Kiev whom Golbert describes as “rejecting the institutional model of religious development,” many did not move along a “progressive scale of observance”

¹⁵⁴ Based on their two surveys (1992/93 and 1997/98) Chervyakov et al. note, “Though the Jewish family retains the leading role in the formation of Jewish identity, extra familial factors acquire an increasingly significant role in ethnic socialization. For Jewish young people, friends and Jewish educational institutions mean nearly the same thing as family upbringing” (2003:73).

¹⁵⁵ Markowitz (1995:406) offers the case of Boris, an Odessan currently residing in the United States, whose father was the *gabbai* (synagogue assistant) and *matzah* baker for the synagogue during Soviet times. According to Boris, his family attended the synagogue and celebrated all the holidays but he himself did not care about it at all. “I went to the synagogue a few times in my life, but I didn’t like it ... I just wasn’t interested ... I always knew I was Jewish, but I didn’t think about it one way or the other.” Also the Mikva Project website (<http://www.mikvahproject.com/china.html>) describes a story of an elderly woman from Odessa who, in 1939, as a seventeen year old bride, went into the Black Sea for her mikvah immersion.

(2001a:209). This chapter includes stories of Jews who have engaged in partial, indefinite, interrupted, and at times abandoned attachments to religious practice.

Defining the Borders of Religious “Community”

Judaism, in the words of Seth D. Kunin, is a complex cultural system that, in its modern incarnations, can be viewed through a number of different, interrelated and sometimes contradictory categories: religious affiliation, ethnicity, nationality, secular identity and civilization (2002:128). The Russian language provides its speakers with two words for Jew: *evrei* and *iudei*. As Deutsch Kornblatt explains, the term *evrei* defines a Jew as a member of the *evreistvo* (Jewish ethnic group or Soviet-defined nationality) whereas the term *iudei* identifies a Jew as “a follower of the laws and rituals of *iudeistvo* [Jewish religion], or *iudaizm* [Judaism]” (2003:214). In other words, a Jew from the Russian-speaking world who defines him/herself as an *evrei* (male Jew) or *evreika* (female Jew) can be a member of any Jewish, or even non-Jewish, religious congregation and still, in his or her own understanding and in the eyes of the Russian public, remain a Jew as defined by birth and, in the case of the Soviet Union, as defined by membership of the Jewish nationality (2003:214). This orientation of being a Jew stands in contrast to the beliefs of American Jews and Israelis who, according to research conducted by Cohen and Eisen, “thought the one way to cease being a Jew is to convert to another religion” (cited in Deutsch Kornblatt 2003:213).

One who is a *iudei*, on the other hand, defines him/herself through the beliefs, practices, liturgy and rituals of Judaism and naturally possesses an ethnic Jewish identification defined matrilineally (or through conversion). For those who identify themselves as *iudei*, belonging to Christianity or any other faith is regarded as transgression. The material included in this chapter shows the complex relation of these terms in the daily practices of Odessa’s Jewish population.

According to Michael Chlenov, a Moscow based anthropologist and a Jewish activist, the Jewish religion is not defined solely by belief in God but, rather, is understood as a

certain code of behavior, adherence to religious rituals, a “social address” and a form of life corresponding to religious beliefs (cited in Ryvkina 2005:143). In the Orthodox religious interpretation, religiosity is expressed in observance of the religious commandments inscribed in the Torah, which, according to religious Jews, represents the word of God. In the narrowest sense, Orthodox Jews define themselves as religious by observance of *Shabbat* and the laws of *kashrut* and *niddah* (family purity) (Danzger 1989:27). However, it is important to remember, as Jonathan Webber rightly points out, that Orthodoxy “may mean different things in different contexts” (1994b:84). Adopting the Orthodox discourse, the local affiliated Jewry of Odessa commonly distinguished between those who were and were not considered religious mainly on the basis of their commitment to observance rather than their faith in the sense of belief. In this Orthodox interpretation, the former naturally represented the latter. Thus, Jews in Odessa often used the words *religiozny* (religious) and *sabludauchiy* (observant) interchangeably. At the same time, it was not uncommon for Jews in Odessa to define themselves loosely as Orthodox by affiliation as distinct from Reform Jews, and here no actual observance was necessarily implied. In order to locate themselves more precisely within the local sphere of Orthodoxy, orientation as a *Chabadnik* (follower of the Chabad congregation) or a *Litvak* (follower of Lithuanian Orthodox movement) would then be offered.

Despite Reform Judaism’s strength in pre-Revolutionary Odessa, today *Reformisty* make up only a small proportion of religious Jews in the city. Definitions of religiosity differ greatly between Orthodox and Reform Jews. According to the Chief Rabbi of the Progressive Jewish Congregations in Ukraine, it is not observance that defines Reform congregants as religiously Jewish but, rather, their belief in Jewish doctrine and their “Jewish soul,” which guides them in leading a morally right life. Reform Jews I met in Odessa who identified themselves as religious did not partake in strict observance of Jewish religious commandments and no such observance was demanded of them by their rabbi. For the most part, they defined their practice of Judaism by participation

in synagogue life and celebration of *Shabbat* and Jewish holidays (without their full observance) as symbolic gestures important to their Jewish identity.

The present-day local Orthodox Jewish religious population was primarily made up of young and middle-aged Odessans who had come to learn about, participate in and involve themselves with the Jewish religion through programs organized in the city since 1991. Unlike emissaries from other religions, conversion from other religions or ethnicities is not part of the project of Jewish religious leaders. Their mission in Odessa, as elsewhere in the world, is to bring Jews closer to the Jewish religion, in other words, "to make lapsed Jews into better Jews" (Aviv and Shneer 2005:36).

Among the larger number of affiliated Jews who were involved in Jewish institutions such as Jewish schools, universities, after-school programs, camps and other events organized and sponsored by Jewish congregations, the test of being an observant Jew is whether they maintain Jewish practices outside these institutions in their everyday life.

I found it difficult to gather precise statistics on the numbers of observant Jews in the city. Often figures provided by synagogues were inflated by including affiliates who might attend synagogue functions but would not necessarily describe themselves and be recognized by others as "observant" (see Chapter 3). Moreover, the majority of affiliates were children and young people educated in Jewish schools and universities who in many cases did not follow a religious life outside these institutions. I believe the figures provided by practicing Odessan Jews to be more reliable, although some of them pointed out the methodological problems involved. As Vera, a woman in her thirties, put it:

First of all it is difficult to say who exactly fits into that [observant] category. Obviously those who keep *Shabbat*, kosher, proper dress, *mikvah* etc. But, as you know, in Odessa you can meet people who observe these commandments in various combinations. Take me for instance: kosher, *Shabbat* – but I wear trousers and not a skirt [as is demanded of women by the *halakhah*]. I think that, for many, my status is [therefore] questionable. Second of all, today there are a number of

people who do not necessarily publicly demonstrate their observance of commandments. They live by them but you don't really see them about.

Beyond the problems of definition, observant Jews could also have a hard time identifying one another personally, given that the three religious congregations offered few joint events and maintained a rather separatist attitude toward one another. Also, Odessa historically has never had a Jewish quarter and Jews live throughout the city. Many faces came and went, unknown or simply unnoticed. While it is a religious obligation for men to pray three times a day (preferably in the presence of a *minyan*),¹⁵⁶ which usually took place in the synagogue, women (who are exempt from such specific time-bound commandments) might well come and go altogether unseen.

Based on figures provided by one observant woman, there were approximately 120–150 people in the city who led a fully Orthodox religiously observant life. Others put it at about 100–110 families in total. The large number of Israeli religious emissaries greatly added to those figures, especially during Jewish holidays. As noted in Chapter 3, my own observation of regular Friday services at the Chabad synagogue counted between 100 and 120 attendees (with far more on high holidays – and even more according to the secretary of the synagogue). In the realm of Reform Judaism, all of the 100 or so members of the Temple Emanu-El were considered religious by Yulya, the leader of the congregation. Figures provided by Reform congregants themselves ranged between 50 and 70 people. While occasional visits of foreign (usually American) Reform Jews also increased the number of Reform religious Jews attending synagogue on religious holidays, no permanent foreign emissaries worked with Yulya on a regular basis and hence are not counted.

Thus it is evident that, because of the lack of stabilized information gathering and also instabilities in the very category of who should count as a *iudei*, it is very difficult to pin down precise numbers. Equally, when it comes to the number of *evrei*, it has already

¹⁵⁶ Quorum of ten men required for public prayer.

been documented in the Introduction that the estimated number of Jewish residents in contemporary Odessa varies between 12,380 and 30,000. Still, on the basis of the available figures, it is strikingly clear that that Odessa's fully observant *iudeis* constituted only a tiny proportion of the city's *evreis*. However, this may give a false impression of the significance of the new visibility of Jewish religiously oriented institutions and locales, the phenomena of religious adherence or affiliation and the Jewish revival. While only a small minority had internalized religious observance *fully*, other Jewish residents were partially or occasionally observant in their own ways. Also, in Orthodox and Reform environments, and in other settings, I met Jews who claimed to be *veruchii* (believers) but not *religiozny* (religious) or *sabludauchi* (observant).

Then there were the large numbers who made use of religious centers as social centers, sent their children to Jewish religious schools (even if only for the quality of the education provided), who relied at one time or another on aid and welfare support provided through the synagogues or simply subscribed to the Jewish newspapers printed in Russian and distributed free of charge (6,000 to the Shomrei Shabbos newspaper as per Chapter 3). These are all ways in which the lives of many non-observant and partially religious Jews, as well as the observant, have become intricately with the process of religious revival and marked their identity as Jewish. The changing context of these phenomena is also important, for it must not be forgotten that many of the old ways of being identified as Jewish, some externally imposed, some chosen, had simply gone or were disappearing. Crucially, passport designations of Jewish as a nationality, the Jewish quotas and state directed anti-Semitism no longer existed, while the association of being Jewish with being a Russian intellectual was being replaced with other images of Jewish orientation linked to the public display of Jewish practices and traditions.¹⁵⁷ Thus, even for those who rejected the new

¹⁵⁷ In 2008 Odessa's mayor, Eduard Gurtvitz, who was shy of any religious affiliations in the city and rarely publicly spoke of himself as a Jew during the time of my fieldwork, took part in a public celebration in honor of the circumcision of his newborn son, conducted at the Chabad synagogue. This

religiosity or whose observance was less obvious and extreme, the controversies, negotiations and experimentation that came to surround Jewish traditions spoke of a new consciousness of the *question* of what it was to be Jewish for many of Odessa's Jewish residents.

From Secularism to Judaism: Motivations and Paths of "Return"

Many of the Orthodox observant Jews I met in Odessa described the change in their life from being "non-observant" to becoming "religious" as a "process" that began with giving up perceived "non-Jewish practices" (such as eating pork) and gradually accumulating religious responsibilities that eventually led to acceptance of the totality of the Jewish faith and daily observance of specific religious rituals. This process took longer for some than for others, at times with changes of direction that even led some to partial or total termination of observance. In comparison to the *ba'al teshuvah* movement¹⁵⁸ (most popular in the United States and Israel), which characterizes its adherents as those who "repent and return" to Judaism, Odessan Jews rarely described their personal trajectories as "returning" to traditions previously abandoned by their elders; nor, indeed, did they refer to themselves as *ba'alei teshuvah*. Rather, much of what I observed appeared to be all about new beginnings typically unrecognized as familiar by the parents or even grandparents of newly observant Jews – and who, in some cases repudiated these practices outright, deeming them "backwards."

As described in detail in the previous chapter, there were many people attracted to Jewish life when it first made its public appearance in the city in the early 1990s. They

event received high visibility in the local press (see http://www.chabad.org/news/article_cdo/aid/650316/jewish/Circumcision-Makes-History-In-Odessa-Ukraine.htm).

¹⁵⁸ The term *ba'al teshuvah* literally means "master of return" and is used to describe Jews who embrace Orthodox Judaism as a way of life on their own initiative and often later in life, in contrast to those Jews who were born and raised in Orthodox environments. For an in-depth description of the contemporary revival of Orthodox Judaism in the United States, see Danzger (1989).

described their initial interest in Judaism as growing out of a desire to learn about topics that had been previously banned, and also to feel part of a meaningful collective. Listening to them speak, I had the sense that many of these novices had found great strength, courage and meaning in their dedication to Judaism as a new way of being Jewish, and being Jewish as a new way to be. Enthused with a sudden sense of the idea and power of God and, at the same time, the freedoms of their post-Soviet reality, their tales expressed a spirit of rebellion against previous ignorance of Jewish history, traditions and religion. In describing her own early days of observance, Vera told me that it was like being affiliated with an underground movement. "It was more like a period of war than a time of normal living," she told me. "It [observing] was very difficult then but my memories of this period are very warm," she concluded.

Vera was a child of a mixed family. Her mother was Jewish and her father was Ukrainian. Growing up in Kiev, she was "very distant from Jewish life." Enrolling in Odessa University in 1990, she moved to Odessa, a city she had previously often visited to see her family. At that time, Vera was already searching for a meaningful life but, as she explained, lacking information.

At the end of that summer, there was an ad in the local newspaper announcing that all Jewish girls 12 years old and older and all Jewish boys 13 years old and older can have a *Bat* and *Bar Mitzvah*.¹⁵⁹ One of my cousins decided to partake in this ceremony. Then there was a small group that formed, those interested in studying tradition, rituals, Hebrew etc. My cousin took me to one of these meetings. It was all very exciting then. Everything was new and we were eager to learn.

Yet, as Vera emphasized, "It did not happen overnight."

Becoming religious was a process for me. When I was first starting to observe, everything was difficult. What to eat, how to observe *Shabbat*, holidays, combining them with my studies. I always had to find a way to get around something. I remember first, my two cousins and I decided that we would keep *Shabbat* and then, with time, all three of us made

¹⁵⁹ *Bar* (male) and *Bat* (female) *Mitzvah* is a ceremony conducted for young boys and girls to celebrate their "coming of age" and their willingness to accept the commandments of God required of adult men and women.

the decision to keep kosher. We were living at home with my aunt who was not supportive of our choices and viewed them as extremely radical. So it obviously made things more difficult. We *kashered* one of the burners on her stove and a few pots and used only those to cook with.

A similar account was given by Maya, who was also a university student when she first became acquainted with Judaism. Unlike Vera, Maya grew up identifying herself as Jewish and always finding herself in a crowd of Jewish friends. "I was studying math and many of my friends in the [university] department were Jews." Maya was first attracted to the synagogue by an advertised celebration of the Jewish holiday *Hanukkah* which she attended with her now husband, Slavik. "We didn't really know what to expect but decided to try it," she explained.

I grew up playing chess, travelling to tournaments, KVN [*Klub Vesyolykh i Nakhodchivyykh*, The Club of the Merry and Resourceful], all things that were not happening any longer, so this was something new, something interesting and intellectually stimulating. At the end of that night we were all invited to come back and, as you can see, we never left since.

"Slowly," as Maya explained:

we started giving up some things, such as eating pork, shrimp, mixing dairy and meat, going out on Fridays ... With time it became more natural to us and we took on more and more. It wasn't until we moved away from Slavik's parents' house that we started observing fully. Once you start doing certain observances it just doesn't feel right to turn back ... now it's just part of life.

In her explanation, it is clear that Maya highlighted the moral commitment both she and her husband accepted and the routinization of practice that contributed to their ongoing observance today.

She and her husband were among the first couples in Odessa to have a religious Jewish wedding ceremony, complete with *huppah*,¹⁶⁰ conducted outside Migdal. Maya told me that their ceremony even made local news, emphasizing the newness of Jewish

¹⁶⁰ A canopy under which the bride and groom stand during the wedding ceremony, symbolic of sharing their future house together. The term is also used to describe the wedding ceremony as a whole.

religious weddings in Odessa some 15 years ago. Literally making history, Maya and Slavik's *huppah* can be found on display at the Museum of History of Odessa Jews.

In some cases, individuals had explored other religions before ultimately choosing to accept and live by the canons of Judaism. Dima, a 33-year-old biology student, shared with me his story of becoming observant.

I was always interested in religion. My mother is Jewish and my father is Russian. At one point in my life I was intrigued by Catholicism and I seriously entertained the idea of being a devoted religious man then ... When I first came to the old synagogue to learn Hebrew, thinking I might one day go to Israel, where some of my family had already emigrated. There I met Shaya [Gisser] and we started talking. I never made it to Hebrew but did decide to start studying with him instead. There were probably only 15 of us then and we met daily. This man [Shaya] was able to answer a lot of questions I had about life and about religion.

A number of observant Jews, and not only those associated with Shaya's pioneering initiative, described their decision to turn to Judaism as a "religious awakening," a sudden moment of clarity as to their need to live a "morally right life." Katya, a 16-year-old-student of the Or Sameach school, told me that, despite her many years of Jewish education, she had never wanted to be a practicing Jew. Constantly suspended for poor behavior, she told me that no one, including herself, ever thought she would become observant. One night, as she recalled, she had a dream in which she saw that she was going to hell for all the mischief she was doing daily. When she woke up, she told me, she made a decision to live her life with the *Vsevishniy* (the Almighty). That day she broke up with her boyfriend, who was Jewish but not religious, and started anew.

Fear of God's judgment continued to play a role in Katya's new religious orientation. She told me that she continually tried to speak to girls she saw making the same mistakes she used to. When I last saw Katya she was studying in Israel in a program from which she had previously been dismissed. Knowing that I was travelling back to Odessa, she asked me to take her mother a small parcel of head coverings which, she told me, every married Jewish woman needed.

Coming from the same mixed background, Leib, a newly observant Jewish man in his late twenties, told me that, on graduating from the Or Sameach religious boys' school, he took two years off from being Jewish. "I was interested in other things and just busy with life," he explained. Five years ago he started attending Migdal and weekly lectures by a local Jewish educator, Yosef, which he says had a great influence on his decision to become observant and a follower of the Chabad movement. "One day I just knew that this was right for me." Shortly after, Leib adopted the Jewish name by which he called himself and was called by others.

For some newly observant Jews the deciding factor had been the occurrence of a "miraculous" event in which God's power was revealed. Diana told me the story of her cousin who became "fanatically religious" following the miraculous recovery of his mother, previously diagnosed as critically ill:

When my cousin found out about his mother's condition, they told him she only had two days to live. He spent all day in the synagogue praying for her recovery. When he found out that she was actually getting better and once she was back on her feet, his previous interest in Judaism turned in to a fanatically religious life.

Kostya had recently returned to Odessa after some ten years of living in Israel.

Although his life there had been entirely secular, about two years after his return he became convinced that in Odessa one could only be Jewish through the prism of religion. For him, "everything else speaks of assimilation." Being drawn to Hasidism and specifically the Jewish mysticism explored on one of his trips with the Chabad synagogue, Kostya found himself becoming more involved and observant of many Jewish commandments. He was the only member of his family who had incorporated religious Jewish practices into his daily routine.

Among a number of my friends in Odessa, it was a relationship with an observant Jewish partner that led them to make the change to religious living. Sometimes different levels of observance became an issue while they were dating; for others it was not until the actual engagement. David told me that, during his relationship with Nastya, she started to become more and more religious and he felt that he had to

follow. Even though their relationship ended, he continued to lead a religious life and later moved to Israel. I saw David on my last visit to Odessa in May 2008: he was still observant but now living back in Odessa. Hannah decided to become a religious woman because of her engagement to Artur, a young yeshiva student from a neighboring city. Her religious "elevation," as she described it, was driven by her desire to be with Artur and to build a life with him.

For others, it was an interest in the Hebrew language and the discovery of their culture and history that had initially attracted them to attend religious classes, lectures or rituals, which evolved into adopting religious observance in their everyday life.

"Academic endeavor with no interest in a religious life originally brought me to study on my own," one of my informants explained. "Over time I started to put it into practice."

Most observant Jews I interviewed emphasized the security they felt in their relationship with God, the Almighty "protector" and "judge" of life. At the same time, the more practical comforts of feeling part of an *obshchina* (communal group/community) and the support from other observant Jews were also highlighted. "Stability," "order," "assurance," "understanding of life's path" and a sense of "belonging" were among the felt benefits of living as observant Jews. When I once asked Diana, who defined herself as "traditional" in her level of observance, what in her view had persuaded friends in her circle to become "fully" observant Jews, she answered:

Religious people have a lot of things in common. You get married right away, you have a wedding, holidays, shmalidays ... lots of things to discuss and people to discuss them with ... within the *obshchina* people organize their own business ... friends ... holidays together ... working together ... But if you're traditional, as most of us are, you start to feel pressure. It starts to feel uncomfortable to not put up a *mezuzah* if they offer to do that for you ... not to come to the synagogue for holidays ... not to observe them ... for some it is actually scary. Religion brings you comfort and security that you are living the right life ... others will praise you, understand you and approve of your life choices ... plus there is a

place for you after death. It's pretty. Also it's nice to come to the synagogue and feel yourself *svoim*¹⁶¹ among *svoih*.

Senya, who had no affiliation to Jewish organizations in the city and identified himself as a secular Jew, offered an interesting perspective on the "pull factor" toward religious life:

First of all, it is curiosity. Second, today we don't have the same system of organizations to entertain and improve our youth: *pionersky lager* [Communist youth camp], Komsomol and others of the same caliber – none of that exists anymore. Nothing is introduced to replace it. In the meantime various new groupings formed among new ethnic and national organizations ... Some are attracted by material benefits, then others get sucked into it ... some people go to universities, some go elsewhere ... I think these are the main factors and not a call of blood.

Religious observance was not something that newly observant Jews simply accepted into their life. It is important to document that narratives of religious awareness frequently included periods of uncertainty, puzzlement, disappointment and, at times, abandonment of religious practices altogether. Equally, there was no inexorable progression from partial acceptance of, and adherence to, religious commandments toward complete dedication to living a religious life. Indeed, from what I observed, more often than not Jews affiliated with synagogue life did not go on to become observant Jewry.

Vera told me that her attitude toward Judaism had changed as she traveled, grew older and matured. After some years in Odessa during which she had kept a very strict observant life, she decided to move to Israel for a two-year program offered to survivors of Chernobyl where she chose to study at a religious women's seminary. In Israel, she explained, being religious meant something completely different both to her and to those she described as local religious Jews. "For me," she said:

¹⁶¹ Yurchak has written extensively about the term *svoi*. According to him, this Russian term has no exact equivalent in English and the closest relation is to words such as "us," "ours" or "those who belong to our circle" (2006:103).

this period of fighting to express yourself as a Jew died when I left Odessa where it was truly a struggle. In Israel, where it was not a problem to be a Jew, you suddenly realize that eating kosher and keeping *Shabbat* are not heroic acts but rather a way of life. I lost the sense of why I was doing what I was doing.

"It was more than that, though," she continued:

When you first learn about Jewish ideas expressed in books, you expect religious people to always live according to those laws. But there are laws and there are people. And people are people. I was disappointed by some things that I saw among religious people in Israel and it [religious life] started to seem fake to me.

Vera told me how she had rebelled fiercely against religion while studying in Israel. "It was a serious crisis for me," she explained. Laughing with embarrassment, she recalled blasting her stereo on *Shabbat* (despite the prohibition on using electricity) and inviting all her female classmates to her room to partake in the *kiddush* (prayer recited over wine, traditionally conducted by men). She was quick to add that she would never act like that today. It would take returning to Odessa and the passing of another year until Vera found her way back to her old routine of observance, largely through her wish to share her knowledge with other local Jews. Leading her life as a religious woman and a Jewish educator today, Vera admitted that much of her early observance somewhat "maximalist": only now had she found the right balance between her personal convictions and religious obligations. "It takes years until it becomes a natural part of you," she confessed.

For some Jews, the process of becoming religious took much longer than for others (at times with interruptions) and, with a number of Jews I met, it never reached the level of a religious life. Svetlana, a young television producer in her late twenties, told me that she had tried to wear a long skirt, keep *Shabbat* and keep kosher but after two weeks she realized it was not for her. "I was just fed up," she said to me. Yet she certainly did not feel that she had by any means failed at being a "good Jew." It was simply that religious observance infringed on her ways of being and her freedom of choice. Similarly, Miriam told me how she used to light candles on *Shabbat* but then

resented not being able to work on Saturdays, her busiest day as a city guide. Some Jews who had experimented with religious observance claimed that they still fulfilled some religious obligations while others felt no such loyalty binding their future orientation.

Negotiating Tradition: Challenging Orthodox Models of Judaism

During my stay in Odessa, I witnessed many of my friends partake in some religious rituals but not others; similarly, they selected which elements of religious practice to include in their daily lives. Because of their lack of “full” observance, these Jews did not claim to be religious. Having gained a familiarity with the proper conduct of Jewish holidays, rituals and traditions through various channels of Jewish education, many had chosen their own ways of observing these celebrations. For various personal reasons, these Jews did not aspire to be religious while, at the same time, some did not rule out such a possibility. Knowing the rules, they felt comfortable dictating their own dos and don’ts. Young parents often welcomed Jewish traditions for their children that they themselves had not had growing up, giving them what they described as the “basics:” for instance, circumcising a baby boy or giving a first haircut to males at the age of three as prescribed by the *halakhah*.

Andrey and his wife, Lika, were a young couple in their late twenties. Both raised in a secular Jewish environment, they met and started dating while participating in a Jewish camp run by Betar.¹⁶² “Betar is not a religious organization,” according to Lika, “but it is a Jewish organization that did teach us a lot about Judaism.” While neither of them were active members of the organization today, many of their close friends, favorite stories and references are linked to that period of their lives.

When Lika and Andrey decided to get married, their parents did not object to their desire to have a *huppah* for the central ritual of their wedding vows as long as all the

¹⁶² A Zionist youth movement founded in 1923 by Vladimir Jabotinsky. It is modeled on the ideas of self-respect, military training and defense of Jewish life and property against anti-Semitic outbreaks.

other elements of “traditional Russian wedding” would follow.¹⁶³ They proudly told me that they were the first in their families to have a religious wedding. According to Lika, their parents did not object, possibly because none of them had any idea of what the ceremony would entail.

13 Young Jewish couple during the
huppah ceremony

14 Guests gather outside to welcome the
bride and groom

During the holiday of *Pesah*, I saw Lika empty her house of all *hametz*,¹⁶⁴ following traditional observance of the Jewish Passover, which she took seriously. However other holidays went almost unnoticed in their household. There is, of course, nothing Odessan, or Jewish for that matter, in partial observance of high holidays such as *Yom Kippur*, Christmas etc. However, the contemporary context has given such partial observance a new significance. The meaning and content of such holidays and other

¹⁶³ In cases where parents were not themselves observant and in some cases even if they were, families often encouraged their children who wanted a Jewish ceremony to include elements of Russian, Ukrainian or Soviet customs, which would be familiar to the rest of the guests. The concern was to have a ceremony that would not seem “foreign” to those unfamiliar with Jewish wedding rituals. The Orthodox wedding ceremony of my friend from Odessa (which took place in Dnepropetrovsk- the hometown of the groom) and the dinner following the ceremony included the Russian tradition of family toasts and the hymn *Gor’ko* (“bitter”), which signals to the bride and groom that they are suppose to please their guests with a public kiss. Dinner itself included a range of Russian and Ukrainian dishes. In videos, pictures and stories of other Jewish or mixed (Jewish and non-Jewish) wedding celebrations, one can find a varying mixture of Russian, Ukrainian, Jewish and Soviet traditions in the conduct of their ceremony and reception.

¹⁶⁴ Any product made from any one of the five grains (wheat, barley, spelt, rye and oats) that has gone through the process of fermentation is prohibited during the holiday of *Pesah*.

religious rituals were in the process of being made and remade as families and individuals explored different places on a “Jewish continuum” (Golbert 2001:210).

Choices about whether and which Jewish religious holidays or rituals to observe were often coupled with choices about what *not* to observe when Soviet and Slavic holidays were approaching or old family traditions were at stake. Lika and Andrey included me in some of their discussions on this topic. They spent many late nights in their kitchen debating the issues of putting up a New Year’s tree – a tradition they had both followed in their homes as children. Andrey would cite the Israeli teachers who were advising him on proper Jewish domestic conduct in his weekly classes at the synagogue: this tradition was “Christian” or “Soviet” but definitely not “Jewish.” For her part, Lika thought that it would be rather strange not to follow a family tradition and could not understand Andrey’s interpretation that it was “wrong.” When I left they had decided that no New Year’s tree would go up but that they would nonetheless celebrate the holiday.

The coming of the New Year was perhaps the most often debated or revoked holiday celebration for newly observant Jews. However other minor holidays, such as Saint Valentine’s Day, commonly celebrated on 14th February following the American tradition, had gained great popularity in Ukraine but was also deemed a Christian, and therefore not Jewish, celebration and surrounded with some debate. Burial ceremonies were also occasions when old practices followed in the Soviet Union, but now regarded as Christian, became contested, compromised, or altogether abandoned and replaced by Jewish rituals.¹⁶⁵

Negotiation of traditions was a recurring feature of discussions among students at Jewish institutions, who faced a different set of expectations and criteria for Jewish membership depending in their social setting. In one of my interviews, Vika and

¹⁶⁵ Although I myself never attended a burial ceremony in Odessa, I had a number of conversations with local Jews about burial practice for their loved ones. Cremation, the period of preparation for burial, the actual ceremony and the post-burial benchmarks of remembrance were among the points in question.

Masha, students at the Chabad school, illustrated how their choices about observance were mediated by context. Unlike those in their class whom they described as “observant,” they themselves dressed “religiously” only in school. They stressed that all students in religious Jewish schools had to stick to the rules ordained by their teachers and sponsors; however, such observance was more often than not abandoned in other environments and during other circumstances. They told me that only two out of the 12 girls in their class were “religious,” as defined by observance of religious laws outside the Jewish institutions. “The rest of us,” Masha and Vika explained, “we wear trousers, we eat non-kosher food, we don’t observe *Shabbat* or really anything ...” Listening to their stories, I couldn’t help but wonder how open non-observant students were about their life outside school, to each other and to their faculty. Both girls admitted to me that most students do talk about it to one another and that their teachers were not oblivious to these practices of mixed observance.¹⁶⁶

While both Vika and Masha defined themselves as not observant, they admitted to being influenced by religious education. When I asked Vika how she would feel about going to a church, she responded:

Listen, when year after year you get more drawn into this, you get used to this type of Jewishness. We are not religious, we don’t observe anything, we are as we are, we’re normal like everyone else. But, to be honest with you, somewhere deep inside of me things have changed ... Before [studying at the Jewish school] I could have walked into a church easily, now it’s not the same. I don’t feel right for some reason.¹⁶⁷

Masha’s response was rather different. “I belong to two religions,” she told me. “I am baptized, I have a godfather and a godmother and I consider myself both Jewish and

¹⁶⁶ Religious leaders and teachers at religious schools cited exactly the same phenomenon when describing the limitations of their role in the lives of their students. In the words of one emissary from Israel, “Many children faced the difficult task of living a religious life outside of their schools as their parents are not observant Jews or in many cases are not Jewish.”

¹⁶⁷ The discomfort experienced walking into a church expressed by Vika was also mentioned by other followers of the Chabad congregation during my interviews.

Christian.”¹⁶⁸ Where Vika clearly defined herself as Jewish in contrast to being Christian, Masha saw no such need for compromise for herself. Understanding the pressures they faced in school, both girls told me that the fact that their parents were not observant and, in both cases, that their fathers were not Jewish made it difficult for them to follow the dictates of a proper Jewish life at home.

Proper behavior for observant Jews affiliated with the Orthodox community also involved occasional compromises, often driven by competing loyalties to local cultural norms, family and upbringing. These negotiations were most visible in the forms of dress adopted by some observant women. Married religious women are required by the *halakhah* to cover their hair. Most of the Israeli women emissaries walk the streets of Odessa with stylish wigs that are often difficult to differentiate from natural hair. Such head coverings are expensive and rarely available in Odessa, which leads most women to search for other options, such as cloth head coverings. However, a number of women I met chose to leave their hair uncovered. Willing to change their lifestyle, they were not willing to change their look. Maya explained to me that one of the most difficult things for her to observe as a Jewish religious woman was the obligation to cover her hair and to wear modest clothing that provided full coverage, including a knee-length (or longer) skirt. “Really, can you imagine me in a wig?” she asked rhetorically. “Also, I just feel more comfortable in trousers. I can’t think straight in a skirt, it’s not me,” she added. Growing up in Odessa, she told me, she was used to wearing casual summer clothes and going to public beaches. “I still have a hard time dressing religiously and giving up swimming in the sea. I am from Odessa after all and the sea is part of who I am.”¹⁶⁹ Only official gatherings and formal pictures of her congregation would force Maya to abandon her casual look and put on a wig as a

¹⁶⁸ Masha insisted that those who were baptized knew one another and were often absent from activities in school and Migdal on Russian Orthodox holidays. For further analysis, see Zvi Gitelman’s surveys, conducted in 1992 and again in 1997, which show that the number of Jews in Ukraine who found Christianity to be the most attractive faith rose from 10.7 percent (in 1992) to 15.5 percent (in 1997) (Gitelman 2003:195, 201–202; see also Deutsch Kornblatt 2003:209–223).

¹⁶⁹ According to Orthodox religious practice, swimming is allowed only on segregated beaches.

means of covering her hair. Nor was she alone in adopting an alternative mode of appearance within a close circle of friends: other young and middle-aged women identified themselves as religious without always looking the part. Maya felt that, since men had to be present at the synagogue daily, wearing ritual dress such as *tsitsit* (undergarment with fringes) and *kippah* was more of a requirement for them. Among observant men other “transgressions” took place. Whereas the Israeli rabbis would avoid social settings such as theatre or music performances where a woman’s voice would be heard and did not shake hands with women (besides those in their immediate family) – prohibitions stemming from the *halakhah* – many of the local Orthodox Jewish men did not restrict themselves to such a degree of social separation, in the name of respecting their upbringing as well as the religious law.

During my fieldwork I also met Jews who had experimented with a greater level of observance for a year or two, some longer, and since then found a balance by following lesser, minimal or no observant practice at all. In some instances, as with Vera, exposure to a religious world foreign in values and mentality drove newly observant Jews away from religious life, which they admitted to having romanticized before. Others had lost any sense of the meaning of daily observance of rituals, which they began to find “burdensome,” “unnecessary” and “tiresome.”

I met Dima, an Odessan native, when he was already living in Israel. At the age of 32 he had moved to and returned from Israel to Odessa a number of times. It was difficult to believe, sitting opposite a man with a shaven and uncovered head, gray cotton shorts and a sleeveless tee shirt, that he was once a *yeshiva* student at an Orthodox Jewish institution in a city near Jerusalem. Dima had originally moved to Israel as a fully devoted observant Orthodox Jew affiliated with the Chabad movement. He described his drift away from religion:

When I came here I was beaming with light from all directions. Here I was told that I could only glow in one direction and a very narrow direction. In my *yeshiva* I met students who were not good people and at first this was shocking to me. But, most important, they told me what I could and could not do, what I could and could not have, what I could

and could not listen to and read ... To me this was awkward and constraining. I am the son of a hunter and I am an artist. I was used to a completely different balance in life before. As you can understand, it was not a quick hop out for me. But over time I started to see observance differently.

Among his circle of friends, I met others with similar stories whose step in another direction was smaller than Dima's but who nonetheless deviated from a fully observant life.

Negotiating Values: Dynamics of Family Relations

Among the majority of newly observant Jews and especially among the youth, observance is often adopted on an individual basis, with the rest of the family only partially involved in keeping a religious home or not at all. Given the high rate of assimilation and intermarriage, previously described in Chapter 3, religious observance of one family member often did not, or could not (in cases of intermarriage) bring the rest of the family closer to Judaism. There were some observant families that spanned as many as three generations but their numbers were few.

The reaction of non-observant families to their son or daughter becoming religious varied. On numerous occasions I heard parents express concern about sending their children to Jewish schools where, they feared, they would become religious. At the same time, some parents voiced admiration for their sons and daughters, who taught had them how to "do things right" in regards to Jewish celebrations and rituals. A number of parents described having little choice in the matter of "getting used to" their children's lifestyle. A common response to my questions was a rhetorical "*A chto mne delyat'?*" [What am I to do?]

Malka, whom I met during her visit home to Odessa from Israel, was the only observant member of her family. Her parents, whom she described as "atheist," had, in her opinion, accepted her ways but were far from understanding them. When I asked Malka if her turning to Judaism had affected her parents' Jewish orientation, she

said, "I gave my father a small Torah book two years ago. When I was recently home I saw that it was displayed in his bookshelf. Knowing him, it was a big deal."

Her mother, Anna, told me that her daughter's decision to start living a religious life was made completely on her own. "Both my husband and I are not religious people and religion was never part of Malka's upbringing. She grew up with Jewish intelligentsia values, nothing more. I did not even know that my daughter had taken a Jewish name for herself until I went to go visit her in Israel."

When I asked her whether she now calls her daughter by her new name, she said that she did not. "The name we gave her, 'Ina,' starts with the same letter as my mother's name and it was given to her in memory of her grandmother. 'Malka' means nothing to me" (in Hebrew Malka means Queen).¹⁷⁰

In a later conversation with Anna, she told me that her daughter was an example of a larger shift in today's Jewish society. She emphasized that the Jewish values prized and practiced by today's Jewish youth were not embedded in knowing local Jewish history, art, literature and music or the works of Odessan Jewish artists who wrote in Russian, Yiddish and Hebrew. The notion of belonging to the Russian-speaking intelligentsia, of having an open orientation to the world and seeking to attain the highest level of education and recognition, were no longer obvious markers of Jewish identity, as they had been for self-aware Jews of her generation. This was not to say that contemporary Jewish youth in Odessa no longer espoused these values and aspirations but, she explained, they were no longer seen as markers of being a Jew. This old "cosmopolitan" way of "being" a Jew was now being displaced by the new, more potent associations between being Jewish and identifying with Judaism as a religion in the Orthodox sense emphasizing practice. However, she acknowledged that

¹⁷⁰ Recently it has become fashionable among young Jewish families to give their children traditional Jewish names rather than Russian or Ukrainian names. This caused some disarray in a number of families I knew, who insisted that Hebrew names were not suitable, too awkward to pronounce and bearing no family history.

it was also an inescapable fact that the cosmopolitan basis of Jewish identity had already been radically undermined during the major period of Soviet rule when most of the Jewish religious, cultural, educational and Zionist institutions were closed, destroyed or banned. For Anna and Jews of her generation no such institutions were available.

I asked Anna how she reacted to her daughter's observance of *Shabbat* and *kashrut*, two of the main commandments that separate observant Jews from others by strict regulations on cooking and the consumption of food and prohibited activities on *Shabbat*, including using transportation. Anna told me that Malka would often spend *Shabbat* with her friends. "There, they cook, sleep and go to the synagogue together – as the synagogue is within walking distance. It is a life she mostly leads outside of our home." This was quite typical of observant Jews, who often adapted to fit with their new lifestyle by looking for a place to live close to a kosher grocery store, Jewish school, synagogue and other observant Jews.

When I asked Maya and her husband how their families had reacted to their decision to become religious, they said:

At first they were against it – completely against it! Especially Slavik's family and for some reason they were angry at me. They thought I was responsible for his religiosity. Then, years passed and they calmed down. Time and our serious convictions did the job. They used to get very upset because we would not eat at their houses. I had an easier time convincing my parents ... but I think it's only because they were used to me making decisions from an early age.

In Maya's view, "It was important for us to act in such a way that they knew that it is not a joke but a serious life decision for us and none of their fits and fusses would be able to turn everything back. It was definitely difficult but at the end of the day, they loved us."

Vera also shared her story with me:

My family members were in shock. You have to understand, back then, the idea that “religion is the opium of the people” was embedded in everyone’s heads. I think my family was trying to understand what happened to their daughter ... I think the hardest thing for them was the fact that I became *chuzhoy* [other people’s, foreign] and not understandable for them. They could not even formulate what scared them so much. But time passed and thank God I have a good family and we lived through this and more.

By now it had become a matter for gentle teasing, as her dad would say “I just don’t understand how I, a Ukrainian man, could have given birth to a Jewish daughter.”

Questions of marriage also served as potential points of disagreement. On one occasion, my friend David took me to meet his grandmother for their regular tea. A newly observant Jew, David did his best to evade her persistent questioning about when he was going to get married but eventually said that he was waiting to meet a nice Jewish girl. His grandmother responded:

You should want to marry someone because they are a good person, an intelligent person, a kind person but to marry someone just because they are Jewish, it’s silly. Our family has so many nationalities in it, so many wonderful people who have helped me throughout my days ... Must you upset me by this type of talk? ... and why do you walk around with that funny hat [a *kippah*]? Must you tell everyone you’re Jewish?

“That is exactly the point,” David answered.

Some families I encountered were more accommodating of their children’s life choice and extremely ready to compromise. Lera and Vadik, exposed to the observant life of Jews through their daughter and her family, were always equipped with plastic dishes at their house, making it kosher for those occasions when their daughter and her family came to visit. Even more flexible was a non-Jewish man I met whose Jewish daughter (through her maternal line) lived an observant life – and who, out of respect for her choice, had accepted *kashering* his kitchen and eating only kosher products and cuisine at home. Non-observant members of families would often take part in religious holidays and celebrations, although only marginally relating to them. “I went

to the *bris* of my grandson,” Emma told me. “It was a nice celebration but all these religious things ... oh, not for me. I am a Soviet person.”

There was a difference between observant Jews who tried to smooth their transition into a religious life for their non-practicing or non-Jewish family members and those who dealt with the situation in a radical manner. For instance, Vera had tried to gain her parents’ approval by what she called “shock therapy” while others spoke of ways they had tried to find a balance. Mendy told me he that he would explain everything to his mother and answer any questions she had. “They are just not used to it,” he told me, meaning his parent’s generation as a whole. “They grew up at a different time. You also have to understand them.”

The religious practice of newly observant Jews was also meaningful in forging new social bonds with those undergoing similar experiences or living the same routines. These associations often mimicked those of family or close kin. In some cases, as for Malka and others, deciding to spend *Shabbat* away from home meant not only being able to walk to the synagogue but also the feeling of being in the “right atmosphere.” “When everyone is doing the same thing, it’s nice and you feel good about it. If you’re the only one, it’s lonely,” one of my informants explained.

It was a common practice of observant Jews (both Israeli and local) to invite religious newcomers to their house for a *Shabbat* meal after the synagogue service in order to make them feel part of the “family.” Both the Orthodox synagogues also held a *Shabbat* meal on the premises offered free of charge to anyone who wished to stay. Attending *Shabbat* meals, whether in people’s homes or the synagogue, was one of the ways I personally was initially able to interact with the city’s religious minority. In many ways I felt that the religious circles entered by newly observant Jews functioned as kin networks, where care, attention and love was directed to new members of the community as for one’s children. As Vera herself said, “Those with whom you share this experience often become like your family.”

Challenging Jewish Practice: The Politics of Jewish Observance

If religious practice functioned as a way that Odessa's observant Jewry recognized each other as "kin," it was also used to challenge one another's status as "properly" observant. At the same time, non-observant Jews would often altogether reject the claim that Jewish identity was defined by religious practice, by contrast to their own Soviet- and/or Odessan-informed notions of secular Jewish identification as linked to family history, education, knowledge, culture, a sense of growing up in a Jewish environment of the city and a worldly outlook on life. Thus Jewish observance in Odessa served as a platform for debate both within and outside the religious minority.

At times, local Jews questioned the authority of the foreign religious leaders based on different principles of observance. One family relayed to me that the Israeli families working in their religious congregation refused to eat in the homes of local congregants. For this family, this behavior displayed a blatant lack of trust in the kosher status of local Jews. In general the fact that Odessa's Jews had to be reliant on foreign rabbis was seen as a sad reality of post-Soviet rule. Challenging this implicit hierarchy, local Jews often would describe some Israeli religious practices as in fact more lenient than their own. On more than one occasion, they entertained me by reporting "guidance" from Israeli emissaries, such as "you only have to fast until noon" or "this is only expected of men." Two of the local observant men I knew would not eat at the Chabad Rabbi's house during the holiday of Pesah choosing to follow stricter restrictions in kosher diet than rabbi Wolf himself.

For others, however, the system of observance internalized through Jewish education provided mostly by the emissaries, served as their main point of reference in judging themselves and others as "good Jews." "I am Jewish and Ukrainian," Zhenya told me. Although he was only ten years old, each of these terms had distinct associations for him, even if in his own practice they merged. "My [Ukrainian] grandfather and my [Jewish] grandmother believe in Jesus," he explained. "And you?" I asked him. "No, I do not. But I am not as good a Jew as Haime [his friend], I do not keep my Saturday

[*Shabbat*], I watch TV.” It was clear that Zhenya’s knowledge about “proper” conduct for Jews was something he had learned at school, as his own family environs could not have provided it. Based on the fact that Haime followed one of the main obligations of Orthodox Jews, Zhenya judges him to be a “good” Jew while hesitating to grant himself this title. He, however, saw himself to be a better Jew than his grandmother, who believed in Jesus. While Zhenya, like most students in Orthodox schools, was immersed in a different set of religious and cultural orientations at home and at school, it was official education that clearly shaped his judgment on the contradictions he stood witness to.

15 Children at the Mazl Tov Early Child Development Center practicing for the *Seder* meal that marks the start of *Pesah*

Those whose observance was shaped in the early 1990s found matters rather different today, under the new Jewish leadership. As one informant described, “The [religious] *obshchina* [community] was nothing then ... We met in a small room and studied ... The classes were not paid for, and the rabbi did not support us financially ... It was not easy.” While it is plausible to assume that present-day observant Jewish life had more “benefits” than at the beginning of the 1990s, I do not question the sincerity of Jews who became observant later compared with earlier, nor that of the later leaders of Odessa’s religious Jewish congregations. Indeed, the reasons for religious observance

of any newly observant Jew were extremely varied and embedded in personal motives and life circumstances.

Secular and unaffiliated Jewry would occasionally display a skeptical stance toward the sincerity of belief, practice or elevated morals of religious Jews, at times focusing on them as individuals and at others as representative of the collective efforts to revive Judaism as a way of life. In one interview, Senya, a middle-aged professor of physics, told me that he refused to believe that a newly observant man he once knew as a *prorab* (simple laborer), and now employed by the synagogue, could ever believe in anything higher than his wage packet. Not only did the man's lack of education mean that he was incapable of having a relationship with God but he did not live by the highest of morals. "I think that 90 percent of people who consider themselves to be religious have never even read the Bible."

Olga Notkina told me:

All of my family and I, from my childhood, were brought up as atheists, not believing in God. So for me it is comical to see people today who are very educated, skilful and talented who now attend synagogue on certain days at a certain time, who wrap up pieces of paper inscribed with prayers in order to remember and who say prayers for their deceased relatives....

Evgeny, a journalist and art collector in his late sixties, told me that the Jewish life of the city was what happened not in the synagogues but, rather, in the Jewish newspapers and publications, the Jewish theater, Migdal Or, and in the work of Jewish artists and ordinary Odessan Jews.

Such views were more frequently expressed by the elderly and, to some degree, the middle aged. In the case of the elderly in particular, it is important not to infer religious commitment of any degree from affiliation to Jewish organizations or centers – for many of them were dependent on aid provided by these organizations yet were, for the most part, not religious.

I also came across young Jewish people who did not associate Jewish identity with Judaism by any means. Misha and Gosha, two of the students in my English class at Migdal, both identified themselves as Jews *po natsional'nosti* (by nationality). Being Jewish was something they were born into and conditioned to understand as involving dedication to education, family history in Odessa and secular Jewish culture as found in the works of Jewish writers, composers – and their taste for Jewish cuisine. Later in life, their Jewish belonging was also linked to emigration and their families who had gone to the United States with the status of Jewish refugees in the 1990s. They both told me on many occasions that being atheists did not make them any less Jewish than the newly observant Jews. Participation in Jewish organizations required interest and time, neither of which they had to spare. While they had both been active in Migdal's programs during their teens, they no longer took part. Like Misha and Gosha, most Jewish young people in Odessa were not religiously practicing Jews but they were in one way or another, currently or previously, partially, occasionally or fully involved in some branch of organized Jewish life.¹⁷¹ Some were partially observant of religious rituals in circles of Jewish organizations or at home.

Middle-aged Jewish Odessans whom I encountered were aware of Jewish activity in the city (mostly through their children) but were for the most part neither involved in Jewish organizations nor observant of Judaism, due to time constraints, lack of interest and/or anti-religious ideals. In many cases their orientation was closely associated with that of their own parents and determined by their Soviet upbringing, although, as we have seen and continue to see throughout the thesis, there might be different paths even within the same family. In the eyes of the Jewish emissaries and other Jewish activists, the middle-aged Jewish Odessans had the important task of nurturing the Jewish knowledge that their children received in schools and other centers of activity. Despite these high expectations, many of the parents I met did not provide a

¹⁷¹ In many cases the younger members of this group showed a higher level of participation because they had more time. University students and young adults were less active and more concentrated on their studies, careers and other realms of self development.

religious context for their children (even if, as was the case with Vera, Vadik, Anna and Marik, they occasionally showed their support in other ways by accepting or accommodating kosher needs). It thus could not be said that they accepted that either they or their children were under an obligation to live their lives in accordance with religious laws. In many instances children explained their parents' lack of enthusiasm as stemming from a mixed family background, where a non-Jewish parent would have a hard time accepting strictly Jewish practice in the home. In cases of full Jewish families, secular orientation or Soviet upbringing were among the major reasons that Jewish parents were hesitant about, or objected to, religious practice at home.

The Tail End of a Religious Revival?

"Today in Odessa there are more Jewish organizations than there are Jews."

Misha, one of my informants

Despite the common assumption that former Soviet states are progressively becoming more open to religious influences as they evolve free of the Soviet policy of secularization, in Odessa many described religious and Jewish affiliation as declining. Compared to the 1990s, when many of the Jewish religious institutions and practices were new and inspiring in post-Soviet Odessa, today their novelty has seemingly worn off. A number of my informants suggested that the very security of simply knowing that these institutions and practices were now permanently lodged in Odessa took away the urge for active participation. Moreover, in the context of improved economic and social conditions, a number of Jews found themselves less reliant on Jewish aid provided through religious organizations (although, in the face of the current economic climate, this may change again). For others, active involvement was a youthful phase that they outgrew or changed their focus under the pressure of providing for their families and building their careers.

Given that conversion is not an objective of Judaism (as discussed in Chapter 1), it is apparent that there is a limited pool of possible congregants and strong competition between congregations. Leaders of Jewish programs acknowledged that, as a result of Jewish emigration from the city, the number of Jews recognized as such by the *halakha* and the Law of Return had greatly decreased. Similarly, the Reform religious leader explained the relatively small size of her congregation compared to the Orthodox communities as due in part to the fact that the Reform community had arrived “too late” in Odessa and found that a large number of Jews were already affiliated with Chabad or the Litvak movement. Thus, compared to the earlier days of Jewish activity when many local Jews were eager and open to engage in Jewish institutions of any description, many of the remaining Jews were already congregants or activists among their preferred communities or had already tested the waters and, for one reason or another, opted for partial or no religious affiliation. Others, who were never interested in Jewish associations, simply ignored the call of Jewish outreach. It is possible that there were some Jews who, despite the high visibility and active outreach programs, were somehow unaware of the developments from the 1990s onwards, perhaps because they resided on the outskirts of the city. Indeed, the Chabad synagogue was latterly planning to open a new branch on the outskirts of the city in the suburb of Katovskovo and apparently already had a *minyan*. (However, since then the construction of the new synagogue has been put on hold due to the most recent economic crisis and the cutback in funding provided to Chabad by one of its most prominent supporters, Lev Leviev.)

Many social scientists have pointed out that heightened Jewish activism in the FSU was often displayed by those Jews who had definite plans for emigration (Chervyakov et al. 2003:74). This was also true in Odessa. A large percentage of Odessa’s Jewish population who were active in the early phases of Jewish revival subsequently made their way to the United States, Israel, Germany and other destinations. Those left to run indigenous organizations simply could not compete with the economic means and opportunities offered by international actors, with their foreign personnel and

externally defined agendas; as Zissels (1999:303) notes, this represented a new stage of the “professionalization of Jewish life” not previously witnessed in Ukraine. This change of character signals a different sense of “decline”. Informants who remembered or knew of the local initiatives in the early 1990s (associated with Shaya Gisser) were not blind to the infrastructural growth, overall expansion and general strengthening of the religious communities, at least in the material sense. Moreover, they accepted and even welcomed the new amenities brought by foreign funding: the kosher grocery stores, the Jewish institutions that supported a religious way of life and, to some degree, the links with a wider network of observant Jewry. But they lamented the times when change was driven from within the local Jewish population. Comparing religious development with the process of building a house, Vera described the earlier moment of Jewish life as like “living in a tent.”

When you are camping it is very romantic but for some reason we always build ourselves houses with strong foundation and thick walls. At first, building anything was ground breaking, we made big steps ... Today we see a different phase of construction. It reminds me of living with my neighbors with all such pluses and minuses ... Whether we like it or not, such is the process.

For all these reasons, many observant local Jews and Jewish activists perceived the present-day religious Jewish life as the tail end of what they had seen as *evreyskoe vozrajdaniye* (Jewish rebirth). Local sociologists meanwhile, describing the general level of religiosity (for all religions) in Odessa, agree that the sudden increase in the number and variety of religious organizations at the beginning of the 1990s constituted what they called a religious revival. However, as indicated by a survey conducted in 2003 by Pankov, a sociologist at Odessa University, the dynamics in Odessa have remained practically unchanged since 1995 for the majority of religious groups.¹⁷²

¹⁷² The survey, conducted in 2003, showed that 51 percent of respondents considered themselves believers, 32 percent could not answer and 17 percent considered themselves to be non-believers. In 1995, 51 percent considered themselves believers while 19 percent had difficulty deciding and 28 percent considered themselves non-believers. While the number of believers identifying themselves as members of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church had increased from 28 percent (in 1995) to 46 percent (in 2003), adherents of Greek Catholicism, Roman Catholicism, Protestantism, Islam, Judaism and other

Although the number of communities has increased, he and other local sociologists argued that religion and religious values were marginal in public consciousness.¹⁷³ This led them to assert that by 2003 it was no longer accurate, as it had been in the mid 1990s, to speak of a religious revival in Ukraine. Other studies support the view that this leveling off is not specific to Odessa. In Kyrgyzstan, Pelkmans (2006a) finds a comparable phenomenon. He notes that, despite the fact that the number of mosques rose and that people more readily asserted their religious affiliation, "it is questionable to what extent this meant more active participation in Islam or Christianity for that matter" (2006b:34). He goes on to reflect, "I was more struck by the lack of interest most Kyrgyz displayed in religion than by a 'religious revival'" (2006b:34).

Conclusion

Echoing themes about secular and religious revival at the end of Chapter 3, this chapter has demonstrated how religious adherence by Odessan Jews amounted to adoption of a *new* way of life rather than a return to a pre-existing code of social norms observed by previous generations. In this sense, I support the claim of Norman Solomon when he states that:

Europeans, east and west, who are "returning to their roots" are not, and could not be, simply recreating the lifestyle of one or more Jewish communities of earlier times ... [T]hey are actually inventing new lifestyles, by selecting one or more past expressions of Judaism, modifying and mixing these with other elements of Soviet, Russian,

"non-traditional" religions (each at 1 percent of the sample) had remained unchanged during the period studied (cited in Richardson 2006:21 n. 10).

¹⁷³ A survey (1997/98) by Chervyakov et al. reached similar conclusions. Comparing this with an earlier survey (1992/93) they found "a general decrease in Jewish educational activity by the Jewish population [in Russia and Ukraine]" as measured by attendance at lectures and seminars on Jewish history, religion and traditions, and listening to Jewish radio programs. At the same time the authors note that regular attendees expressed a "deeper interest" in the above subjects (2003:73).

European [I would add American and Israeli] and world culture.
(1994:97)¹⁷⁴

In this process of modification and transformation, new authorities on Judaism and Jewishness are being created, recognized and simultaneously challenged, all centered on different meanings of being Jewish.

Documenting but looking beyond the general phenomena of synagogue attendance and the public visibility of Jewish holidays and rituals – which do represent a new chapter of Jewish religious life in Odessa life but can be misleading as indicators of local responses – this chapter has described and analyzed the wide range of religious attachments found among Odessa's Jewry. Religiosity is characterized by a variety of open-ended narratives and infused with multiple compelling forces of Jewish, non-Jewish, secular and religious orientations, which provide meaningful alternative modes of Jewish expression to local Jewry beyond the institutional model of Jewish practice. Hence it is more appropriate to speak of "religious adherence," meaning a state of mind as well as a space for the formation of a spiritual life. As explored by my informants, in some cases this has led to a new or altered direction in their perception of Jewish identification without entailing "full on" observance of a set of rules. "Religious adherence" thus may include full, partial, short- or long-term dedication to Judaism, whether sought after as complementary to or as a replacement for their old convictions.

Similarly, if we assume, as at least some Odessans did, that the impact of the religious revival has been fading since the 1990s, the term "religious adherence" which is less laden with the sense of newness and rebirth helps us to conceptualize the attitudes to

¹⁷⁴ Solomon is describing a group of young Jews he met in Leningrad (Saint Petersburg) in 1982 who had recently acquired *tefillin* and were praying according to the Orthodox requirements. His doubts about whether they are thus "returning to their roots" springs from the fact that the boys received instruction about the rituals from a visiting Orthodox Jew and not from elderly Jewish residents of their native city who, they feared, had forgotten the "authentic" ways. This example makes Solomon wonder, "So in what sense were the young Jews of Leningrad returning to their roots? Certainly not in a sense of reclaiming the way of life of their grandparents or great-grandparents in fear of their altered standards" (1994:87).

and patterns of religious practice today. In this way too it is thus more appropriate to describe and imagine the present-day settings and orientations of religiously oriented Jews who test the parameters of Judaism and its institutions in a variety of ways.

It is perhaps too early to assess the full impact of religious adherence in Odessa, given the ongoing changes in patterns of migration, the evolving range of religious practices in the public and private orientations of believers and the global economy which feeds the life of religious education and practice on a number of important levels. It is, however, possible to conclude that the initiatives of religious awakening and reawakening in Odessa have brought about a turbulent but nonetheless permanent alteration to the existing modes of Jewish practice, whose aftermath is yet to be seen.

Secular Jews often think of religious Jews as the other side of the coin, that is, that being observant of Jewish religious traditions naturally separates them from the greater Jewish populace of assimilated Jews. However, contemporary adoption of a religious way of life in Odessa, where many Jews are raised in ethnically mixed and assimilated families and social environments, often included negotiation with secular demands and the personal desires of family and friends. Indeed, in many cases, adherence to Judaism did not even naturally lead to association with other religious Jews – who were themselves far from homogeneous, divided as they were by associations with Israeli leadership, attachments to Odessa, the point in time when they became affiliated with their specific congregation and other factors. As the cases in this chapter make apparent, Judaism as a religion has undoubtedly become one of the ways of identifying as Jewish for the local people in Odessa, albeit fully taken up only by a minority. However, this transformation has not gone unchallenged, both from within and from outside religious circles of local Jewry.

Will religious Jews be successful in influencing the less observant and secular Jews who still make up the vast majority of Odessa's Jewish population? Or will religious adherence and affiliation turn out to be a short-lived phenomenon, with Odessa's long history of liberal Jewishness ultimately proving more influential? How influential will

Reform Judaism become in Odessa in relation to the city's Orthodox congregations?

This raises the more general question about the development of religious practice within the context of Odessa as a translocal space, influenced as it is by new trends of return migration, the shifting levels of available funding for future development projects, state policies on religious freedom and the role of religious education in Ukraine. For the moment, we can conclude by acknowledging that adherence to Judaism is a multidirectional and multilayered texture of Jewish identification, the future of which is in the hands of the next generation.

Chapter 5

Missionizing Odessa: Jewish Revival on Display

Our Generation has witnessed a miracle from G-d: With the fall of the Iron Curtain, Jews were given the right to leave the Soviet Union and, most importantly, the Jews who remained were finally free to learn about and practice what was so dear and important to them: their tradition.

Today, we must celebrate this miracle by helping Russian Jews to become proud of who they are. This is the biggest challenge facing Russian Jewry today.

The former Soviet Union is the only region in the world where poverty is both material and spiritual. Hundreds of thousands of Jews are so poor they cannot even put bread on their tables and take care of their basic needs. At the same time, the lack of fundamental Jewish knowledge has deprived many Soviet Jews of the history, culture and tradition. Let us not miss this opportunity to give these people a chance. The Soviet authority once denied them their Jewishness. Now it is in our hands.

We must do all we can. Let our people know and let our people live!

Rabbi Berel Lazar, Chief Rabbi of Russia
(Brochure of the Federation of Jewish Communities of the CIS)

Introduction

Already during the period of *perestroika*, Jewish visits from the West to the Soviet Union had increased as Jews, mainly from the United States and Israel were led there by individual curiosity, family genealogy or projects organized by local Jewish communities, especially the United States. This process significantly intensified following the demise of the USSR, when access to former Soviet States became easier (Aviv and Shneer 2005:61). Thus, many cities in the FSU and Eastern Europe, previously only imagined through popular folklore, became sites of what is often designated Jewish "heritage tourism." This growing interest in discovering the

"different" Jewish modes of life of diaspora Jews, and the trend for finding one's roots, created a growing demand for the museums, memorials, cultural centers and other diverse modes of exhibiting Jewish life now found in many cities in the FSU. This chapter analyzes the ways that Odessan Jewish culture is put on display in cultural "performances" organized for foreign audiences. The key exemplars here are the visits, known as "missions," arranged by Jewish philanthropic organizations. I examine the conventions and ideologies guiding these events and the implications for those observed and those observing (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998:78).

Concentrating mainly on one Jewish mission organized by an international Jewish organization, which was one of the largest events associated with a foreign delegation that I witnessed in Odessa, I engage with the larger process of cultural production and the politics of display embedded in Jewish outreach programs and heritage travel. This chapter thus contributes to current literature on the culture of display and its growing popularity in the region over the last 20 years (Kugelmass 1994; Feldman 2008; Aviv and Shneer 2005; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998; Gruber 2002). However, such accounts are mostly located in the sphere of museum and memorial studies, or other forms of organized heritage travel where cultural displays are more fixed and detached from the participants than the events that I explore here.

The second theme of this chapter – interacting with the theme of cultural display – is the specific role of (primarily faith-based) philanthropic investments in the region, which have also been discussed in current work on post-Soviet development.

Expanding the range of those studies, this chapter examines the role and interaction of visiting volunteers (the "givers"), the beneficiaries (the "takers") and the intermediaries involved in the charity efforts of an international Jewish organization.

Throughout the chapter, I engage with the processes of making history and place making that surround the contemporary re-creations of Odessa's Jewish life for the eyes of charitable donors and enacted by the recipients of their philanthropy. The actual schedule of missions, the content of their organized visits, as well as the printed

materials provided by the organizers, play a fundamental role in altering Odessa in the eyes of others. Mirroring the one-way nature of these staged encounters, the discourse of local Jews was minimal and, in some circumstances (as was the case with local Jews employed by development projects) censored from presentation in printed materials and in dialogue. Thus, the circumstances of conversations between local and visiting Jews included herein should always be taken into account.

More broadly, I use the examples of a Jewish mission to explore the larger question of differences and commonality attached to Jewish identity as embedded in mentality, codes of religious observance, conceptions, values and social status, which all stand to be compared and contrasted during the momentary encounters of foreign donors and local Jews, positioned as recipients. This in turn raises issues about the relevance and feasibility of current modes of Jewish outreach projects. Describing the disparity between Western normative understandings of what makes one Jewish and the understandings held by most Jews in the FSU, my research echoes that of Chervyakov et al., who label the process of Jewish revival in Russia and Ukraine as “cultural imperialism ... the imposition of external agendas on people whose value hierarchy is different” from their own (2003:72; see also Caldwell 2008:192 for a more recent confirmation of the same phenomenon). However, in the case of Odessa, where foreign financial means now underwrite the sustainability of local Jewish activity and institutions vital for social reproduction of Jewish life, relations of dependency are not so easy to abolish overnight. Today, as international charities move into a phase of seeking to foster a mentality – and funding reality – of “self reliance” in the FSU, matters become even more difficult. In turn, I argue that performances of Jewish identity for Jewish missions – while disjunct with the more intricate reality of Jewish life – have, paradoxically, become part of the local context of Odessa’s Jewish experience.

What Is A Mission?

Jewish missions are part of the larger terrain of Jewish tourism and heritage travel, which “offers its participants an emotional promise to renew their spirituality, their Jewish identity and their sense of place in a hostile world” (Aviv and Shneer 2005:57) while simultaneously engaging them in meaningful projects of philanthropy. In Odessa, the term *misiya* (Russian for mission) was used to describe any large group of Jewish tourists who visited the city with the goal of aiding the local population.¹⁷⁵ Most participants in missions are middle- and upper-class Jews of American or European descent who can afford to dedicate their time and finance to a new Jewish world site.

Jewish missions abroad are as much about reflecting on the self as they are about seeing others.¹⁷⁶ During these trips, visiting Jews are continuously asked to put themselves in the place of their “less fortunate brothers and sisters” or to imagine the (in fact unknown to them) faces of local Jews as their own parents, who came, if not from Odessa, from a place very similar to it. The process of travelling to Odessa is imbued with narratives of the past and visions of the future –often distant from the everyday reality and historical facts particular to the place.

As Aviv and Sheer rightly emphasize, Jewish travel is “less about sustaining already existing connections and memories between individuals and communities” on site “than it is about inventing new relationships” between visiting Jews and other Jewish people and places (2005:52). In telling the story of the UJC mission to Odessa, I aim to capture the ways in which Jewish Odessa is used as a historical anchor for its travelers’

¹⁷⁵ Describing the meaning of “missions” in relation to memorial tours he researches in Poland, Kugelmass (1994) suggests that the term is laden with a “time out of time” quality, a sense of liminality, that visitors experience participating in activities they often avoid in everyday life.

¹⁷⁶ Other scholars working on the subject of charity and philanthropy have pointed out how the process of giving benefits the givers by allowing the volunteers and aid workers to re-create themselves as more virtuous and spiritual persons (Allahyari 2000; Craig 2005); indeed, for (Caldwell 2008) they are the *main* beneficiaries of faith based charitable activity.

search for a meaningful Jewish experience, a place where new relationships are imagined and forged on the basis of identified symbols of supposed Jewish commonality (Hebrew language, prayer, Israel, memory of the Holocaust and Jewish traditions) and a sentiment of belonging experienced most profoundly by Jews of Ashkenazi descent. However, even if these do coincide, as Janet Poppendieck points out in her work on voluntarism in the United States, “the fact that there are shared values ... does not necessarily mean that there is sameness” (cited in Caldwell 2008:199).

A UJC Mission, according to the organization’s website, is “truly unique.” It guarantees travelers a “heightened appreciation and connection to their Jewish identity.” The goal of such a voyage is to create travel experiences “imbued with meaning,” giving participants the chance to visit with “members of their extended Jewish family and to come face to face with the shared heritage, traditions, and values that unite all Jewish people.” Participants in these missions are said to come away with a newfound understanding of “where they’ve been and a vision of where they are headed.” Participants are often encouraged to apply their enthusiasm for improving the lives of less fortunate Jews around the world to other projects of Jewish development. The gift of “feel[ing] good for doing good” (Poppendieck 1998:185) keeps visiting Jews eager to engage in future philanthropic efforts.

Among the local organizers in Odessa, Jewish missions are given the highest priority.¹⁷⁷ Their outcomes (personal donations, future financial dedications and expanded sponsor lists) guarantee the success of any given organization. On the ground, in order to guarantee the smooth operation of a mission, top representatives from the United States and Israel are flown in to personally guide sponsors (donors) through the daily

¹⁷⁷ The description here focuses on large fund-raising missions conducted by non-profit organizations. Smaller and individual trips to the city rely on a wider range of resources and reasons for visiting. I met visiting Jews who had utilized sources available through their synagogue, travel agency, Jewish genealogy websites, other friends who had previously visited the city, local publications purchased abroad etc, thus potentially experiencing a different version of Odessa.

operations of their programs. Local personnel and leaders of these programs are also briefed on what sponsors would want to see in the 15–30 minutes allocated to introduce a program,¹⁷⁸ visit a facility or get to know local participants. During the days of the visit, groups follow a tightly regulated schedule, following itineraries drafted prior to their arrival. Missions are divided into clusters of about 15–20 donors. Each group will be introduced to Jewish life in the city through the different prisms of Jewish religious institutions, Zionist organizations and community building initiatives directed largely by American means.

These missions are also welcomed by the city authorities, who treat a visit by a foreign delegation as a proud moment in Odessa's current development trajectory. Special arrangements cushion arriving donors from the usual "hassles" of passport control and traffic by arranging speedy transfer through the airport and luxury buses for transport around the city.¹⁷⁹

Jewish missions, lasting usually for two to three days, produce a theatrical reality where local Jewish life is exhibited, narrated and, at the same time, filtered through the ideals and perceptions of the visiting Jews. During this time the visiting donors, in this case the UJC, are formally welcomed by the organizations they sponsor (in this case Sokhnut and Joint) and then shown around a tailored Jewish Odessa comprised mostly of Jewish programs supported by the sponsoring organizations.

Jewish organizations further strengthen their call for fund-raising by producing media materials (small brochures, videos etc.) that present an image of Jewish Odessa "in need" through carefully chosen stories and pictures of local Jews, customized for their specific goals. Each mission has a *mission* to exhibit that part of Jewish Odessa supported and developed by their sponsored organizations and to demonstrate their

¹⁷⁸ "Program" in this context refers to particular named projects designed to fulfill specified social needs.

¹⁷⁹ Describing his arrival in Odessa with the Tikva Mission, Joel Hoffman writes: "Exhausted and jet-lagged, we were met at the airport by representatives of Tikva who had arranged VIP treatment for us. As VIPs, we bypassed the usual immigration procedures and took a van directly to a waiting lounge" [http:// posted-online.com/Odessa/](http://posted-online.com/Odessa/).

ways of facilitating Jewish growth as the best way of sustaining local Jewish life. Similar to the larger “diaspora business” described by Aviv and Shneer, different Jewish organizers involved in missions in Odessa demonstrate their efforts in “designing, promoting and implementing” their own program with “specific educational objectives based on the different ideologies and goals of organizational sponsors” (Aviv and Shneer 2005:56).¹⁸⁰ Jewish religious institutions, Zionist organizations and community building initiatives thus each have their own way of presenting the city and its needs.

A religious kindergarten, which I visited with a mission organized by Tikva mostly made up of young American modern Orthodox Jews, put on a show for their guests where a four-year-old “couple” demonstrated their knowledge of *Shabbat* by dressing the table with the requisite objects, pretending to light *Shabbat* candles and reciting the appropriate prayers.

16 Children of the Tikva school demonstrate their knowledge of *Shabbat* to visiting American guests

¹⁸⁰ See Gruber (2002) for a description of the greater phenomenon of Jewish tourism which similarly reveals an ambivalence in the way places and people are presented and distorted to suit specific organizational and individual needs.

In the case of Israeli-sponsored programs, children often demonstrated their skills in speaking Hebrew and showed their attachment to the “Jewish homeland” by reciting songs and sharing their stories of Taglit.

Attending and participating in these missions allowed me to discuss and observe Jewish activity as a product marketed by leaders of different Jewish development projects, as a phenomenon experienced and related to by donors, and as a “framed act” put on, and later discussed, by local Jewry amongst themselves and, at times, directly with me. Among my informants, these events aroused feelings ranging through excitement, at times boredom or sadness and, at other times, frustration and even anger. In what follows, I attempt to contextualize these sentiments by concentrating on one specific mission that I was able to follow continuously throughout its three-day duration in July 2006.

The UJC: Background and Structure of Operation

In 2006, the UJC represented and served 155 Jewish federations and 400 independent Jewish communities across North America. Although it was also involved in advocacy work/lobbying, the core function of the organization was to raise and distribute funds “for social welfare, social services and educational needs,” according to the description posted on its website. The UJC:

plants seeds for Jewish renaissance and renewal; ensures the Jewish community never waivers on its commitment to provide human services and to advocate for just social policy; and works to continuously strengthen the North American Jewish community’s link to Israel and the worldwide Jewish family.

In Odessa, the UJC funded programs operated by Joint and Sokhnut. The UJC had an overseas partnership arrangement with these two agencies and described them as the “the driving forces in developing re-emerging Jewish communities” in the FSU.

Joint has been operating in Odessa since 1990. An international organization, its programs are focused on serving the needs of Jews throughout the world, particularly

where their lives as Jews are threatened or made more difficult. Its motto is "Jews in need should be helped and should be helped to live as Jews" (O'Brien 1986:128) and it is "committed to the principle that Jews should be helped to remain in countries of their birth rather than to immigrate to Palestine" (O'Brien 1986:128). Joint sponsors "programs of relief and rescue" and works to enrich local Jewish life in Odessa by supporting religious observance (all denominations), Jewish education, Jewish culture and welfare (Gidwitz 1994).¹⁸¹ While the majority of Joint-sponsored programs are run locally, the major questions of operation and budget are mainly dealt with by Joint's US representatives whose project budget allocations, I was told by local Joint officials, were "not always well related to local needs." At the same time, participants in Jewish activities and organizers of various projects also put the blame for misdirected aid on the local Joint officials themselves, who were often accused of keeping funding for their own administrative and personal use.

By contrast, programs run by Sokhnut are based on the assumption that "Israel stands at the heart of the Jewish future." As Chapter 3 details, Sokhnut initiatives in Odessa were, until recently, primarily focused on promoting *aliyah*. Today, due to the shrinking number of emigrants from Odessa, as in the greater post-Soviet territory, Sokhnut has expanded its mission to strengthening the relationships of local Jews to their supposed "homeland" by means of Zionist education and short term study and/or work abroad programs, mostly focused on youth. These initiatives continued to support the ideology that Israel is the center of Jewish awareness despite the fact that most Jews they involved were choosing not to live there.

Joint and Sokhnut receive most of their aid from the UJC and thus treat missions of its members with high priority. Each year the UJC picks one city as the destination for gathering various combinations of their donors and activists to partake in Jewish development projects first hand while simultaneously learning about fund-raising, goal

¹⁸¹ http://reportsbetsygidwitz.com/visit_to_jewcom_ukrainemoldova_apr_may_94_01.html.

achievement and generally improving their skills as philanthropists. During the time of my fieldwork, Odessa was selected as the destination for the UJC Annual Campaign Chairs and Directors Mission, in which I was asked to participate as a local academic, responsible for briefing the delegation on the day of their arrival. This opportunity offered me a chance to follow the mission for the rest of their stay in the city, observing and informally interviewing participants on the trip.

“My Odessa through the Sunglasses of an Israeli:” Rehearsed Stories and “Professional Jews”

The first day of the UJC mission included workshops held at the hotel and a welcome dinner featuring a number of speeches by the organizers and a few remarks about Odessa’s Jewish history delivered by the city mayor – who, as the organizers proudly remarked, happened to be a Jew.

On the second day, UJC visitors divided into small groups and were escorted around Odessa by Joint and Sokhnut representatives, learning about their respective initiatives. I was invited to join a group supervised by Shira, an energetic American–Israeli woman in her forties who worked for Sokhnut. She was accompanied by Olga Samburenko, 22 years old and now living in Israel – one of six Odessan natives paid by the organization to take part in the visit. Her travel expenses to Odessa from Israel were covered by her participation in a session called “My Odessa through the sunglasses of an Israeli,” set up especially for the mission in order to personalize *aliyah* with individuals’ stories. As far as I could gather, Olga’s role also entailed showing our group “her Odessa” while simultaneously expressing her gratitude to UJC donors for helping her change her life by relocating in Israel.

Boarding the bus, everyone in our delegation received a card describing Olga’s story (see Appendix 3). UJC guests then focused their attention on the front of the bus where Olga herself stood, recounting the important details of her life, all the while thanking her audience for sponsoring her *aliyah*. Born to a Jewish father and a Russian

mother, Olga described to the group her upbringing in what she called an “international family.” “We ate *matzah* on *Pesah* but I also went to church every Sunday with my mother.” As she explained, her decision to live her life “as a Jew” stemmed directly from her initial participation in Sokhnut’s summer camp, which she had first heard about through a friend. Based on the fact that she was a potential *oleh* (emigrant to Israel), her application was accepted. Her parents saw the camp as an opportunity for her to have a “nice and free vacation” and did not initially object.

Reflecting on that summer, Olga described the experience of the Sokhnut camp as an “injection of Jewishness.” She shared with her audience the joy she experienced in meeting interesting people who “spoke the same language” and feeling herself “part of the Jewish family.” On her return, she told her parents that she now considered herself Jewish and expressed discomfort with continuing to attend church with her mother. “My parents were shocked,” she told the group. “They did not know what had got into me.” Carrying on her participation in Sokhnut programs, at times in secret from her parents, Olga returned to the camp annually, later taking on the role of a counselor.

Olga was careful to say that she did not encourage her campers to go to Israel but left it as an option.¹⁸² She herself decided to move to Israel, prompted by her evolving role in Sokhnut’s programs and also a personal relationship with an Odessan native Israeli she had met at one of the summer camps. However, her plan to emigrate was disrupted when her parents themselves emigrated to Germany, taking her with them. At this point, Shira interrupted Olga’s narrative to clarify to UJC donors why some ex-Soviet Jews migrate to Germany as opposed to “returning” to Israel, which she could see aroused some surprise. “They do not have as bad an association with the country. In the Soviet Union, they were never educated about the Holocaust,” she explained to

¹⁸² Based on many stories told to me by others who worked in Sokhnut programs and who described the organization’s tactics as “brainwashing,” I would be inclined to say that Olga’s declaration here was influenced by her participation in the UJC/Sokhnut mission or that she represented a minority.

the group, also pointing out the additional benefits of receiving higher social benefits and being part of the European Union. Olga did not volunteer her own family's motivations to the group but she told me later that her mother had suffered a stroke and moving to a country that provided "good medical care" had been a key reason. After two years in Germany Olga did finally emigrate to Israel and now lived in Eilat with the man she had first met at the Sokhnut camp.

Olga's participation gave Shira a platform for presenting her case as a real life happy ending. After all, it was through Sokhnut's programs that Olga had recognized her Jewish connection and adopted it as her permanent and primary identity. Moreover, Olga had educated others and herself had made the ultimate decision to live in Israel – setting an example of a "good Jew" according to Zionist discourse. As presented by Shira, Olga's story of leaving a hostile Germany to make a life in Israel presented a touching example of *aliyah* in which Olga appeared almost a descendent of Vladimir Jabotinsky, Odessa's legendary 19th-century Zionist. Shira emphasized how, through her organization's efforts in "reconnecting Jews to their homeland," they could be taken out of the estranged, repressive atmosphere of Odessa that could be recognized in Olga's situation. Viewed rather differently, Olga's example clearly illustrates a different case of Zionism, in which her involvement with Sokhnut fostered an ideology previously unknown in her life.

Later, Olga revealed part of her story not aired to the entire group. She told me that she and her partner had had a problem because Olga was not recognized as Jewish by the *halakhah*, which meant they could not marry in Israel. They therefore made a trip to Cyprus where they had a civil marriage ceremony, which could be recognized in Israel. Olga's decision to remain in Israel also struck me as rather more provisional than her publicly presented case. "For now we're in Israel," she told me, "and then we'll see." "Odessa is very nice to visit but with my parents abroad I also feel that I don't have that much left here anymore," she added. "For now Israel works for us."

Thus, despite the fact that, in direct dialogue with visiting UJC guests and in practice, her story identified Israel as the central symbol of her Jewish identification, the privately revealed elements of her narrative made me hesitant about her professed feeling of obligation to the Jewish state and those who had helped her achieve her goal of emigration. Acting (as a paid representative) on behalf of a Zionist organization (Sokhnut) that had sponsored her travel back to Odessa, Olga would naturally relate only those features of her personal trajectory that she knew were appropriate in this situation while passing over her personal struggles, lack of recognition and any thoughts of relocation.

I also managed to speak to other participants, who had extended their stay in Odessa in order to see their family and friends for a longer period of time. Mendy, another participant in the “My Odessa through the Sunglasses of an Israeli” session, explained that all the Odessan contributors were chosen on the basis of their skills as “professional Jews,” which for him meant someone who had worked in Jewish organizations, and who could be relied on to relay the message of its mission and answer any questions in the right fashion.¹⁸³ He himself admitted that he had treated this job as an opportunity to return home on a paid trip, stay in a nice hotel and hang out with his friends. In his view, all the participants shared the same attitude to their task.

Making Sense of Local History: “Inappropriate” Narratives of Jewish Life

Following the schedule, our group headed next to meet Olga’s family. Since her own parents were in Germany, she had arranged for us to meet her mother-in-law, Marina.

¹⁸³ In the field, I often heard the term “professional Jew,” which was explained to me as referring to Jews who worked for Jewish organizations, received work-related benefits and treated their Jewishness as a profession. Shayduk (2007:3, 6) uses the term to describe Jews who “begin to position themselves as Jews” through their role in Jewish organizations or programs of Jewish studies and not by their family upbringing.

The meeting took place in the courtyard of a small café on the outskirts of the city, where Marina lived. As Olga explained, Marina felt uncomfortable revealing her life in her small apartment to foreign guests.

17 UJC guests thanking Marina with a gift

Marina, a tall woman with black short hair and light hazel eyes, was born in Moldova, adjacent to Ukraine, in 1950. In 1983, Marina, her husband and their two children had relocated to Odessa where they were given an apartment, courtesy of the Soviet state, in a neighborhood on the outskirts of the city. There, Marina had found a job in her profession as a baker, working for a small shop specializing in pastries, where she is still employed today.

While it was Olga's job to prepare the participants, Marina appeared somewhat unsure of what was expected of her and wanted from her stories.¹⁸⁴ Shira's group was eager to hear about the hardships of WWII and underground Jewish life during Soviet rule. Their later questions also revealed a curiosity about post-Soviet socioeconomic

¹⁸⁴ While Marina's account was unrehearsed, it was nonetheless constrained by her reliance on Olga's translation and input.

transformations in Ukraine and Marina's possible plans to reunite with her family in Israel. But, where the group of sponsors presented Marina with various scenarios of Jewish life in the USSR, mainly focused on struggles of Jewish practice under Soviet persecution and during WWII, she had a narrative of her own. Marina's story initially offered the visitors little insight into specifically Jewish suffering during the period of the Great Patriotic War. Despite the fact that both Marina's parents were Jewish, her story focused on the hardships her father faced as a soldier fighting the Romanian troops with the Soviet army and her mother's state of fear during their evacuation to the Caucasus. Both her parents, as she described, were traumatized by the distance and uncertainty that separated them from one another. This was the narrative she remembered most coherently from her mother (she herself was born after the War).

To the question "How did you know that you were Jewish?" Marina's response was, "I was born Jewish."¹⁸⁵ Marina seemed uncertain as to how to respond to the enquiries of visiting Jews about "being Jewish in the Soviet Union," since she did not see her Jewishness as anything more than a biological given. "I never paid attention to who was Jewish in Kishinev [Moldova] or in Odessa, both are Jewish cities," she said. "I never felt myself to be out of place or belittled because I was a Jew and I can't say I ever experienced anti-Semitism. Everyone lived peacefully and that's all that mattered," Marina concluded.

Her unproblematic Jewish identity was paralleled by her unaffiliated Jewish status. "I was never involved in Jewish organizations here or elsewhere," Marina proclaimed. "To be honest, I don't know anything about them. I always had my work, my home and my children, just work, home and children." She lived on the outskirts of the city,

¹⁸⁵ My material and other research on Soviet Jewry clearly indicate that most Soviet Jews regarded their Jewishness as an intrinsic component of who they were. In the Soviet Union, Jews, as Markowitz describes, "are born Jewish, and no one in the USSR challenges or questions their own or others' Jewishness;" as one of her informants put it, being a Jew is an immutable biological and social fact, ascribed at birth like sex and eye color (1993:139). Gitelman also notes in his discussion of Jewishness in Russia and Ukraine that Jewish as a category has "little to do with Judaism" and "is based on biological descent and an ineffable feeling of belonging" (2009:248).

far away from all Jewish organizations, and had little time for or interest in Jewish affairs. Marina's exposure to Sokhnut itself was minimal. She had only heard about the organization from her son and had never visited its premises or organized events.

During a short pause in Marina's story, Shira turned to Olga and asked her to tell the group about her own encounters with anti-Semitism, mainly her school experiences of being called a *zhidovka*. Olga, serving as an intermediary in both language and cultural experiences between her mother-in-law and her foreign audience, was able to "enrich" Marina's personal account on many fronts. Still trying to place Marina's Jewishness within their own understandings of Jewish identity, UJC participants fished around for Marina's, albeit minimal, Jewish ways. They asked Marina if she thought her parents did things that were "secretly Jewish," since, as they understood it, anti-Jewish sentiment and persecution were parts of the natural experience of living as a Jew in the Soviet Union. "Did you ever light candles on *Shabbat* without necessarily being told what it was?" one woman asked. "Or maybe have a Jewish meal cooked by your mother?" "Matzah on Passover?" someone else interrupted. "Do you remember anything Jewish from your childhood?" After Olga translated these questions, Marina took a minute to think and finally said that she did recall the presence of *matzah* at home, which Olga proudly announced to the group.

One woman asked Marina why her son had decided to move to Israel, a question Marina answered without hesitation: "He met a girl at a Sokhnut camp and they decided to move there together to try living alone." Marina was not referring to Olga but a previous relationship that had originally taken her son overseas. It was obvious by her heavy breathing and tearful eyes that she worried about him living so far away and being separated from his family, especially during times of military operations in Israel. "I only have one daughter here and she recently got engaged so soon I will have a son," Marina shared with her audience. Some of the UJC participants asked Marina whether her daughter's fiancé was Jewish. "He is not," she responded, "but he knows that she is Jewish and he is not bothered by it." In Marina's view, his willingness to marry a Jewish woman spoke of his good character while the fact that her daughter

had openly told her fiancé of her Jewish roots clearly positioned her daughter as someone proud of her family history and thus a good Jew.¹⁸⁶

Another woman in the group wanted to know what had changed in Marina's life since the fall of the USSR. Marina's answer was once again unexpected. "Everything got a lot worse," she said. "The prices are higher and everything is much more expensive today."

Laying out photos of her children on the table, Marina wanted to bring the conversation back to what mattered – her family. While she admitted to missing her son profoundly, she herself had no plans to move to Israel and reaffirmed to the group that her life is here; starting anew at her age would be too difficult. After Marina's final words, Shira publicly commended her on her strength and her support for Israel, on the basis of Marina's son's *aliyah*.

The women in the group took Marina's story as that of a woman who had lived a hard life as a Jew and was now having a difficult time "opening up" about her past. "We're grateful she even let us interview her," one woman commented. "It can't be easy thinking about everything she has lived through." Listening to their remarks, I couldn't help but think that Marina's heartaches were not necessarily down to her Jewishness but, rather, her struggles as a woman working long hours in a low paid job, missing her children and dealing with all the changes to her routine, living in present-day Ukraine. Marina presented her Jewishness as problematic neither to herself nor to her environs, simply explaining that she had always lived in cities where being Jewish was considered and regarded as "part of the norm."

¹⁸⁶ A survey conducted by the Jewish Research Center and the Russian Academy of Sciences in 1992 and in 1997 revealed that "being proud of one's nationality" was the number one answer to the question "What is the most important thing required of a person in order to be considered a genuine Jew?" While 29.4 percent provided this answer in the 1992 survey, this rose to 31.4 percent in 1997. Some other interesting figures in the Ukraine survey are: "Feel a tie to Israel" 5.7 percent (1992) down to 2.8 percent (1997) and "Share Zionist ideals" 0.3 percent (1992) down to 0.2 percent (1997) (Gitelman 2009:249).

Coming after Olga's story, Marina's represented a "case unreached by outreach" – neither affiliated nor drawn to Jewish organized life – that Shira opted to use as a call for intervention. Marina's description of her Jewishness as a biological given, a common understanding among ex-Soviet Jews, was seemingly too minimal for the cause at hand. Shira told our group that many Jews were still in need of our attention to help them "remember their Jewishness, their connection to the Jewish people and their homeland." Since Marina herself had not expressed any dire need to live her life in a more Jewish manner, I wondered what exactly justified these initiatives in the first place?

Meeting Future Israelis or Local Jews?

18 Shira introduces local youth to her delegation

Leaving Marina, we continued on Olga's journey to the Sokhnut center, which Shira referred to as "the heartbeat of the young generation." Having previously attended programs in this building, I was struck by how different it now appeared on this day of the mission visit. The number of participants and personnel was double that on any other day. A few of the students I recognized told me they had been personally asked to come and show their support. For this, they were treated to a nice lunch at the

synagogue. Today the usual display of Israeli posters, plaques of distinguished donors, large images of the Hebrew alphabet and pictures of Odessans in Israel was supplemented with blue and white balloons and banners welcoming UJC donors to Odessa.

The donors were split into groups, each of which was given 15 minutes to learn about one of the different programs sponsored by the UJC: Hebrew language, study abroad programs, a student club, contemporary dance, Jewish choir etc. These were organized in separate classrooms, supposed to represent small offices, where UJC members could meet the local participants and experience Jewish life in Odessa. My group was invited to join past and future participants of Na'ale, a one-year study abroad program that brings children and youth under 16 years of age to Israel; the aim of the program is that their parents will follow by making *aliyah*.

Inside the Na'ale room close to 20 young people were seated facing the guests. Each of the students wore an "I love Israel" pin – and a look of exhaustion from receiving another group of 15- minute friends. Two of them were asked to speak Hebrew to the donors to demonstrate their communication skills, learned in Israel. Two others, who had not yet made the trip, stood up to thank their sponsors for the opportunity that awaited them in the near future. Beaming like the proud mother of well behaved children, Shira asked the sponsors for a round of applause for the students. At the end of the session, she proudly announced to the donors that this year UJC money had bought these students brand new backpacks decorated with the UJC and Sokhnut logos. "These students will not have to live through the embarrassment of carrying their books in plastic bags. Next school year, they will have these wonderful backpacks just like the rest of the Israelis."

It did not strike me as at all self-evident that the young people were in a state of economic deprivation. I was reminded of a comment once made by an Odessan friend of mine: "Americans turn us into a third world population." Nor was carrying one's belongings in a plastic bag seen as at all out of the ordinary in Odessa, even among

those who had other types of bag. Shira's comment struck me as rather inappropriate but no one else in the group questioned their sponsored gifts of kindness.

While it is common practice for Jewish missions to bring gifts, the message they bear is that local Jews are the underprivileged; the hierarchy of givers and takers creates a power dynamics. One might also consider Shira's altogether misleading presentation of Odessa's Jewish youth as the "future of Israel." Most of the youth present were making their life in Odessa and not in Israel. Taking advantage of free travel abroad, most young people I met were happy to return home and did not entertain the idea of permanent emigration.

Sokhnut was the last place Olga's story took us. The rest of the tour was under the supervision of Joint representatives.

"Community Is Not a Given": Remapping Conceptions of Community

19 UJC guests take pictures of posing Migdal participants dressed in traditional Ukrainian and Jewish dress

Pulling up at the entrance to Migdal, which is mainly sponsored by members of the UJC through Joint, Rebecca, the Joint representative, took a few minutes to describe the exact role of Joint in Odessa. "Our initiatives in the Ukraine and elsewhere in the FSU were mainly directed toward providing the local Jewish population with basic social

services and a sense of community." "In this part of the world," Rebecca proclaimed, "community is not a given."

At the entrance to the Migdal center stood four Migdal participants dressed in traditional Ukrainian costume and Jewish attire resembling Hasidic dress of the late 19th century. They welcomed the UJC sponsors by offering them Ukrainian vodka and braided *hallah* bread, as prepared for weekly *Shabbat* meals and Jewish holidays. (I must confess that I myself have seen such outfits only on postcards and in *Fiddler on the Roof* but never in present-day Ukraine and certainly not on Migdal participants except in their theatre performances.)¹⁸⁷ Unlike the images of Israel and other Zionist markers of Jewish identification visible on the Sokhnut visit, here local Jewish cultural experience (perhaps over acted as a Jewish *shtetl*) constituted the main subject of display.

Migdal, originally founded as the Jewish Theatre Migdal Or, functions as a larger project that describes itself as serving the greater need of educating Odessans about Jewish history (local and Biblical) and contributing to the overall awareness of locals and visitors about Jewish life in their city. Here, anyone can come to use the library, the computer lab, attend the school of Jewish art, sing Yiddish and Hebrew tunes, dance etc. While a potential member is asked for papers proving his or her ethnic background¹⁸⁸, the center practices an open door policy for visits and also has a number of non-Jews working for and participating in its programs. Its monthly magazine Migdal Times is, as its subheading reads, a "Jewish magazine for all". All along the corridors of its two floors Odessa's proud moments of Jewish history are displayed in handcrafted posters, collages, postcards, letters, and old photos showing the center's earlier activities. Gifts donated to the center by "sister" communities in

¹⁸⁷ Referring to Kraków Gruber similarly notes that "Jews themselves can be treated as museum pieces" (2002: 132).

¹⁸⁸ I was told by Migdal staff that documents are checked in order to understand which of the students can apply to programs in Israel (requiring one of the four grandparents of the participant to be Jewish), who can have a bar/bat-mitzvah at the synagogue (requiring the mother of the participant to be Jewish) etc.

Baltimore and Haifa are among other details of decorations. Unlike the religious education centers run by Israeli rabbis, the walls of Migdal do not feature pictures of Ann Frank, unnamed Jewish faces of Holocaust survivors or other iconic images of Jewish history. Migdal, which also houses the city's first Jewish museum, has a wall dedicated to local Jewish heroes. The center is located inside the old butchers' synagogue and, at one point in the 1990s when the current Chabad synagogue was being renovated, it served as a prayer house. The building is in dire need of renovation and has been described as hazardous for future activity (see also Chapter 3).

During our visit to Migdal, UJC sponsors saw dancing ensembles of children, a chess class, classes in Jewish art and a meeting of the Jewish ghetto survivors who welcomed us with a song. All these activities were set up in similar fashion to the Sokhnut visit so that guests could actively participate in these small productions of Odessa's Jewish life. Many of Migdal's members were there to represent the center's daily life. I was aware of the fact that the directors of Migdal had put a special effort into gathering their entire cohort to show the center as a lively place of Jewish activity. Based on the comments and smiling faces of the UJC sponsors, I could tell they were highly entertained and touched by the level of enthusiasm and activity fostered inside Migdal's (somewhat decrepit) walls. In turn, many of the participants proudly accepted the praise from their foreign guests, happy to see new faces (which they studied and discussed with some curiosity). For a number of young people, these encounters allowed for a brief exchange of ideas, opinions and history that they described as "valuable." Many of the youth happily welcomed these visits and appreciated the curiosity of foreign Jews towards their city. Missions also gave students the chance to practice their English and sometimes serve as translators.

However much they complimented Migdal's programs, the UJC guests could not help but notice the terrible state of the building – the chipped walls, run-down bathrooms and faded theatre furniture that lined the long dim hallways. I was not the only one who noticed their stares or whispered comments to one another. Later, when discussing the "mission day" with my friend Gosha, he said to me, "I don't understand

these Americans. They come here as if they were coming to the zoo. I hear them talking about our lives here as if it was in a scary movie. Personally it really irritates me.”

Fluent in English, Gosha recalled how excited he used to be by visiting Jewish groups, simply for the opportunity to practice his English. However, he recalled a number of incidents when, in conversations with donors on missions, he and they would be talking at cross purposes on the subject of Jewish identity. “When they ask me if I am Ukrainian, I say, ‘No, I am Jewish.’ They say, ‘No, that’s your religion. What is your nationality?’ I explain to them that I am not religious, I don’t believe in God but I am Jewish by my nationality [ethnicity].”

In another conversation, Diana, who also felt uncomfortable about being on the receiving end of the sadness and grief directed toward Odessa’s Jews, suggested that a day spent outside the city would show these sponsors that Odessans live in comparative luxury. “There are places that really need help,” she told me. “Odessa is flourishing compared to them.” On the whole, she was very proud to say that she lived in Odessa and not just any other city in Ukraine. In her view, residence in Odessa was a privilege she was happy to have been born into.¹⁸⁹

Activities surrounding missions often provided the basis for a great deal of conversation among local people about the differences between American and local ways of life. In most cases, local Jews felt that visitors were not capable of relating to Odessa as long as they viewed it through the prism of their own reality. After a visit by a smaller mission, Sveta, an employee of the Early Child Development Center, Mazl Tov, shared her thoughts with me:

We simply don’t get their mentality. I know some of them are here to see where their money goes but a lot of them, I feel, just come to see

¹⁸⁹ Leonid Utesov describes a similar feeling toward Odessa. “I was born in Odessa. You think I am bragging? But it’s really true. Many people would have liked to be born in Odessa, but not everyone manages to” (2006:11).

Jewish life in a third world country. They bring these things like hand-made gifts – it's so funny to us and they have no value. Something made by the hands of a child that has travelled miles on an airplane and most likely has been broken ... Mostly they bring us cookies and sweets, at times even bags of diapers that have already been opened. Perhaps in the Soviet days people found these gifts precious, but today things are different.

Philanthropy is a relatively new concept to most Odessans. Visiting donors, mostly from North America, were at times described to me as “funny” and “naïve” for their ways of relating to the local scene. I have to confess that I initially found it difficult to relate to such comment by local Jews. Having spent many years working for various non-profit organizations, where fund-raising never came easy, I was sympathetic to these sponsors working to make Odessa a better place. When I shared these feelings with my respondents, the reactions were mixed. Some of them also appreciated the donors’ intentions and actions and a number even described Odessan Jews as spoiled by the system. This was also something I heard from Israeli teachers who complained that Jews in this part of the world just expected to get benefits and expressed little, if any, gratitude for their hard work. Other respondents saw the development of Jewish institutions and missions as problematic yet necessary for sustaining Jewish life in the city.¹⁹⁰ Over time, I started to see the struggles Odessan Jews went through during missions and elsewhere as related to a perpetual cycle of being tied into various Jewish scenarios and ideologies that had no grounding in their own visions of themselves. Among many other things, their sincere pride in being *Odessan* was wounded by their Jewish visitors’ complete lack of recognition, along with seeing them as being “frozen in [Soviet] time.”

¹⁹⁰ Gruber describes a similar attitude expressed by a Jewish activist in the Czech Republic who claimed “we hate [the commercialization]” of Jewish places caused by increasing Jewish travel yet, as he concluded, “it enables us to live” (2002: 145).

Relating to Elderly Jews: Strangers or Family?

20 Members of Gmilus Hesed meet UJC delegation

Our next stop was Gmilus Hesed – one of Joint’s earliest programs in Odessa, set up to provide for elderly Jews and righteous gentiles.¹⁹¹ Today, they sponsor over 8,000 retired Jews and veterans in the Odessa region.

Welcoming us in the courtyard of the Gmilus Hesed building, which is both a club for the elderly and a distribution center for various services and aid, Arkady, the newly appointed director, called for everyone to gather in a circle. “What you are about to see is not in any way rehearsed,” he proclaimed. “This is a typical day in the lives of our people.” While everyone waited outside the door with a sense of suspense, Rebecca, the Joint organizer, took a minute to address the group:

Your parents were fortunate enough to leave these parts of the world to make a better life in America. But you have to remember, not everyone was given that chance. These Jews were not as fortunate as our families

¹⁹¹ “Righteous gentiles” here refers to gentiles who risked their lives to save Jews from the Holocaust.

to start their lives elsewhere. As you walk through the building, think that these could be your parents if they did not leave for America.

The UJC sponsors then entered the building, where programs were said to be operating as usual. At the entrance, Arkady pointed to a small foldout table on which were displayed two types of food package available to elderly Jews. After a short explanation of the various services provided, the guests were asked to proceed to the main room. There on a small stage Nadya, the music coordinator, played the piano, accompanied by the Gmilus Hesed choir, who sang a number of Yiddish tunes.

21 Gmilus Hesed choir sings for the UJC mission

The other staff members sat around round tables, leaving room for two to three UJC sponsors to join them. Each of these tables also had a young translator so that the visitors' questions could be answered. The American guests clapped and danced along to popular Yiddish melodies performed in their honor. Some visitors sang along – claiming to remember the music from their parents' generation.

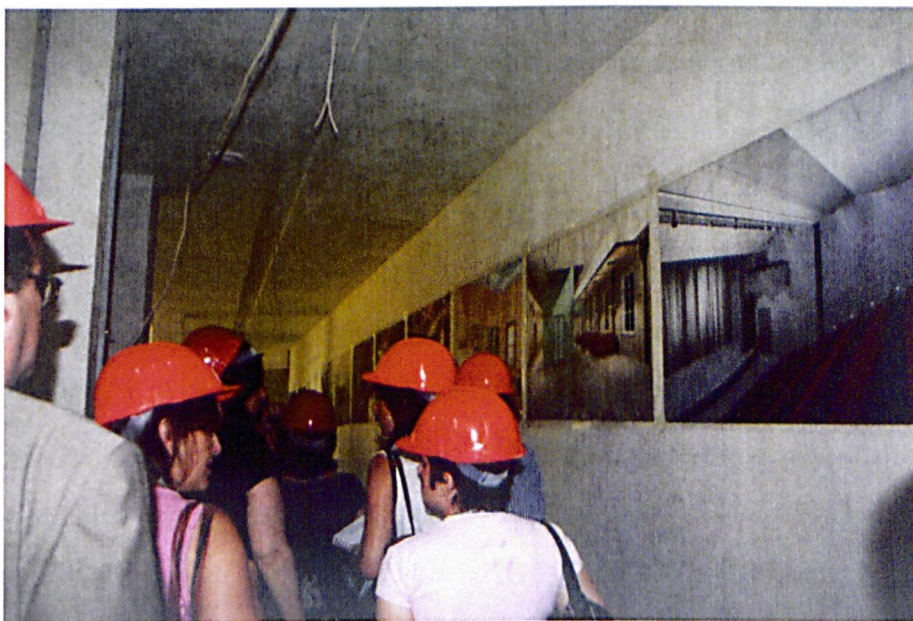
The excursion to Gmilus Hesed stood out on that day's itinerary in making the UJC sponsors recall their parents and Jewish history. Discussions of the sense of "Jewish family" were nowhere as vivid as during this visit. Since many of the visiting Jews were

of Ashkenazi (Eastern European) descent, the faces of Odessa's elder Jewry could well have evoked memories of their own families. However, these Jews were by no means related to them, each with their own life trajectory and web of experiences and attachments. Why, I wondered, did Rebecca need to paint them as "relatives" rather than Odessan Jews, elderly Jews, even strangers rather than "distant cousins" who had missed the boat to America?¹⁹² No doubt this tactic was useful in connecting visiting Jews to Odessa – a place by no other means familiar to them – thus strengthening their philanthropic efforts and their commitment to social justice and responsibility for other Jews whom they now felt they could identify with as "family."

UJC guests were extremely moved by their visit to Gmilus Hesed, expressing their support in terms of an obligation to those less fortunate Jews. On the bus, UJC members were asked by Rebecca to remember these dear stories and to tell them to their individual communities back home in the hope of raising money for Odessa's Gmilus Hesed and other such institutions. It is also often the goal of such Jewish organized trips to translate the enthusiasm associated with visiting new Jewish sites into "tangible practices connected to specific Jewish communities *at home*" (Aviv and Shneer, 2005:57).

¹⁹² As pointed out to me by Stephan Feuchtwang, the process of personalizing through identification is a common tactic used by fund-raising organizations and part of the greater remembrance system deployed in other memorials where, for instance, you are given a person's life to follow as a means of learning about a particular event.

Fixing Odessa?



22 Mission delegation tour the premises of the new Jewish Community Campus

Chapter 3 included a discussion of the new Odessa Jewish community center (Jewish Community Campus, “Beit Grand”) and the ambivalent responses it aroused among the local Jewish population; see also Danya’s comments below. Built and furnished through donations provided by sponsors of Joint, this facility naturally featured as one of the main attractions during the mission. The project was described by Joint’s organizers as the “future of Odessa’s Jewish community” and presented as a visible sign of improvement in the local standard of living. Seeing the new JCC after viewing the facilities at Migdal and Gmilus Hesed created a powerful “before and after” experience for the visitors, a familiar fund-raising tactic in mapping the local scene.

Inside, visiting guests proudly walked around its large spaces enclosed by clean white plastered walls, perhaps imagining the organizations they had visited rehoused inside this brand new facility, reminiscent of the impressive purpose-built facilities of the JCC at home. American donors would find it normal that Joint was now asking the organizations to pay rent for being accommodated at this new facility, passing these

costs on through much higher participation fees. However, Odessan Jews struggled with this new concept of becoming a “self-reliant group.” As one of my informants explained, “Here Jews do not buy seats at their synagogues as a way of donating to their house of worship.” In Odessa, she made it clear, “Jews do not give to the rabbi, the rabbi gives to the Jews.”

Local Jews were initially taught by Jewish aid that they were receiving donations on the basis of being Jewish. Thus, present-day attempts by the same authorities to reverse the model left many in disarray. While I had the sense that local Jewish activists had many issues with their dependency on foreign leadership, they did not necessarily want to be cut off from foreign funds either. When I asked Rebecca about the possibility of being charged rent for use of the JCC premises, she stated that problems arose when program leaders were not able to treat their aid as just initial funding but expected life-long support for their operations. She offered no concrete answers to the dilemmas faced by the programs and organizations.

While it is true that most local Jews did not donate to Jewish causes in their city, there were a number of well-to-do Odessan Jews who had started to take part in local fundraising and charity. Although their donations were still marginal to the larger pool of money provided by large international Jewish funds, this trend has the potential for greatly transforming the orientation of Jewish programs and the local reliance on foreign funding and authority.

Beyond the issues involved in the corporate-style JCC, the fact that Joint was seeking to bring together its different sponsored organizations and programs under one roof also presented dilemmas. Due to the competition between organizations – for funding, for Jews and for recognition – in Odessa, many of the Jewish organizations were affected by internal politics and no longer saw themselves as functioning along a common line of thought and thus representative of the same “community.” As Vika put it, “At least here [in Migdal’s current space] nobody tells us what to do and I don’t have a feeling that I am running a business and working for a foreign cause.” For Vika

and others, the pressures of funding and thus reliance on foreign representatives and agendas weighed against the “up side” of being located in a clean modern space. Yet, for Migdal in particular, their present building, the old butchers’ synagogue, incorporated not only present-day Jewish activities but also a piece of the city’s history, something that the newly painted walls of Beit Grand did not. As Chervyakov et al. rightly point out, “The problems inherent in reviving Jewish community life in the FSU are challenging not only because there are different approaches to the process, but also because even the desirability of such reconstruction itself is open to discussion” (2003:61).

Remembering the Holocaust

23 Mission participants at the Holocaust Memorial ceremony

The third day of the mission started in a rather somber mood. Across from the alley of birch trees dedicated to righteous gentiles, and in front of one of the city’s main Holocaust memorials, a crowd of nearly 300 people gathered on an ordinary summer

day to pay their respects to Odessa's victims of the Holocaust.¹⁹³ As well as the American visitors, the event brought together members of most Jewish institutions that received funds raised through UJC initiatives, including the children from the Chabad school, members of the Hillel Jewish youth club, Migdal participants, local survivors and the Chabad rabbi, Avraham Wolf, who was first to address the public, briefly in Russian and then in English. The program also involved a short speech dedicated to the theme of the Holocaust delivered by a UJC guest, a choir performance of Israel's national anthem *Hatikvah* sung by Sokhnut's choir, the recital of the mourner's *kaddish* (prayer for the dead) and the lighting of six torches in memory of the six million Jews who perished in the Holocaust. Local Jewish survivors, each paired with a young local teen – symbolically representing the connection between our past and our future – were given the responsibility of lighting the torches as UJC members and the others stood in silence. The ceremony concluded with the UJC sponsors spelling out the word "Remember" by placing small stones on a chalk inscription of the word. Placing their individual stones on the ground, a number of guests then hugged each other, saying little in between. Although, as Hannerz observes, tourists are not participants and tourism is largely a spectator sport (1996:105), during the ceremony many participants of the UJC mission reflected on their involvement in honoring local victims of the Holocaust and were acknowledged by Rabbi Wolf for their ongoing involvement in rebuilding Jewish Odessa.

¹⁹³ There are three memorials in the city dedicated to commemorating Jewish suffering during the war-time occupation of Odessa. Two of the three memorials are located in close proximity to each another. The more recent of the two (erected in 2004) depicts six life size figures of naked Jews standing on a large stone on what appears to be the edge of a cliff (symbolically the cliff of death). Below the terrified figures, a large inscription in English spells out HOLOCAUST and underneath in smaller characters in three languages (Russian, Ukrainian and Hebrew), it reads, "never again". Another plaque located beneath spells out (in Russian) "We will never forget, we will never forgive". An earlier memorial (built in 1994) marks the beginning of the "Road to Death": In 1941, this was the assembly point for Jews, who were marched out of Odessa to the concentration camps around the region. The third memorial in the form of a tall semi-oval black stone with a hollowed out Star of David reads in Ukrainian and in Hebrew "In the memory of Jewish victims who were burned and shot 1941–1944" (I am grateful to Michael Rashkovetsky for providing me with the detailed descriptions of the Holocaust memorials).

Although a number of Odessa's Holocaust survivors were actually present at the ceremony, their role did not include telling their stories. For the most part they were the observers at an event dedicated to their own experiences. Their only participation involved the lightening of the six flames. Apart from the short speech delivered by a UJC donor, little of specifically Odessan history actually featured in this affair at all. Instead, the Holocaust was "remembered" according to a universalized model of Jewish tragedy and solidarity (Jewish prayer, the Israeli anthem, lighting of the six torches and the call to remember) often found in memorials dedicated to remembering the Holocaust. Describing the ceremony of Holocaust Remembrance Day organized by Sokhnut in Kiev, Golbert observed an equally formulaic (and participatory) evocation of the Holocaust narrative, albeit in a workshop rather than a formal ceremony:

Our group was to create the setting of the Warsaw ghetto and Auschwitz concentration camp. Another group was to re-create Anne Frank's room ... We were given little time for preparation of the workshops; an evocation of the ghetto and camp experiences rather than the transmission of historical knowledge appeared to be the aim. (2001a:14)

"Ukraine," as Golbert explains, certainly "had its share of ghettos and camps." Yet, instead of depicting the specifically Ukrainian Jewish experience, other, now iconic, locales in Poland and the Netherlands stand in for all places and memories in this thematizing of the Holocaust as a "generic model of Jewish suffering" (2001a:146). Unlike the Jewish youth in Kiev for whom Babyn Yar¹⁹⁴ represents one of the most commemorated and grieved-over event in Ukrainian Jewish history, most of my informants (including the elderly Jews) focused their discussion about the Holocaust

¹⁹⁴ Babyn Yar (also known as Babi Yar, in Russian) is a ravine situated in Kiev *oblast* and the site of a series of massacres carried out by the Nazis during WWII. In one of the most notorious of these mass killings, which occurred on September 29–30, 1941, 33,771 Jews were executed in a single operation. It is estimated that over 100,000 victims (including Soviet POWs, communists, Gypsies (Romani people), Ukrainian nationalists and civilian hostages) were brutally murdered at Babyn Yar (<http://www.zchor.org/BABIYAR.HTM>).

on the Nazi occupation of Odessa and the horrific execution of Jews in the death camps of the Odessa region.¹⁹⁵ In the case of Odessa, the ceremony did not actually take place on the official date of Holocaust Remembrance day (January 27th) or any one of the other days that local survivors commemorate for example the anniversary of the Soviet liberation of Odessa in 1944 (April 10).

The enacted memory of events articulated themes of a “shared history” and a sense of “oneness” based on the experience of Jewish pain, which, as in Golbert’s example, ironed out all particularities of place. The visiting guests reacted with a heave of emotion to a ceremony created for that exact purpose but in actuality learning little of Odessa’s experiences during WWII. Unlike Golbert’s example in which the participants seemed to respond positively to their involvement, I encountered different responses among local participants in the Odessa rite. Danya, a young man in his early thirties and an employee of the Museum of History of Odessa Jews whom I saw at the ceremony, briefly remarked to me that the event was just another chapter in “the Holocaust industry” (referring to the book of that title by Norman G. Finkelstein (2000)). He expanded on this point a week later when we were sharing a train to Crimea, when he told me that he was deeply troubled by the regular visits of what he called *mitzvah* (good deed) American Jews. Returning to the Holocaust memorial ceremony, he said:

Why did they [the organizers] need to bring children there, the elderly, and all the commotion around people’s personal lives, which these Americans could not relate to during this fake ceremony? I was very grateful to the rabbi as he was the only one who said a few words in Russian to the crowd. Why didn’t they have anyone translating the speeches to the people for whom it truly matters? I know it’s a *mitzvah*, but really the majority of the [Odessan] people are not starving, they are not dying, and they don’t need this huge Jewish Cultural Center they built. Why travel all this way to see how we live?

¹⁹⁵ Although, as far as I am aware, no public commemoration of Babyn Yar actually takes place in Odessa, Richardson notes that the topic of Babyn Yar is now included in the history curriculum of Odessa’s public schools, and is taught under the subject of Holocaust (2008:62).

Danya was equally upset that they did not have someone local speak to the crowd of Americans about Jewish Odessa. Why was the task of describing Odessa's history given to someone as foreign to the city as the visitors themselves (Rabbi Wolf)?

In all probability the event was interpreted differently by different generations of Odessa's Jews, as members of each age group would have drawn on different sets of memories, experience and education about the Holocaust. For Jewish youth involved with Jewish programs, the ceremony most likely echoed much of what was taught in programs of Jewish education and camps I visited during fieldwork. Most of the young people would have been able to follow the *kaddish* prayer and the Israeli national anthem and would have known a version of what they were asked to "remember." For the older generations, with their quite different sources of knowledge, and especially for those who had personally lived through the atrocities of the Nazi occupation, this ceremony would not have resonated in the same way as for the young. Among other things, Odessa's Holocaust memorial ceremony also summons up a commonly identified paradox of Jewish memory: "In the immediate aftermath of the Holocaust, many survivors simply wanted to forget and move on with their lives, while imploring the next generation to remember" (Findling 1991:1 quoted in Aviv and Shneer 2005:61). In the context of the Soviet Union, where the official state narrative of the Great Patriotic War supported by Soviet media did not draw the distinction between Jewish and non-Jewish suffering (Gitelman 1994:140)¹⁹⁶ and, further, survivors of concentration camps were in many cases treated as "enemies of the state" (at least until Stalin's death), the focus on forgetting was more forced and profound. Yet many ordinary Jewish Odessans who experienced the horror of WWII did make the

¹⁹⁶ Gitelman gives a number of explanations for the fact that in the Soviet Union "the Holocaust was not portrayed as a unique, separate phenomenon." First, the Jewish population, according to Gitelman, was "unable to press for broader and deeper treatment of the Holocaust." In addition, "no other country in the West lost as many non-Jewish citizens as did the Soviets" and thus "the fate of Jews stands in sharper contrast to that of their co-nationals or co-religionists than it does in the USSR." Finally, "the Soviet authorities had explicitly political reasons for playing down the Holocaust." In the Soviet view, Gitelman explains, "the Holocaust was an integral part of a larger phenomenon – the deliberate murder of civilians– which was said to be a natural consequence of racist fascism, which is in turn, the logical culmination of capitalism" (all quotes from 1994:140).

separation between experiences of the city's Jewish residents and others, even if they were not familiar with the terminology of the Holocaust. Family memoirs and stories told to children and grandchildren in private settings serve as yet another source of knowledge associated with killings of Jews, deportation, suffering, imprisonment and survival. Some of the elderly local Jews, like Nina (in Chapter 2), have also learned of the Holocaust as a wider event through participation in global projects organized by the Israeli Holocaust Research Center and Museum, Yad Vashem, which involved recording her family story and being included in publications on the theme of Nazi imprisonment. Yet other survivors (such as Nina's sister and mother) treated the subject with a high degree of silence or (as in the case of Victor in Chapter 2) concentrated on other Jewish realities during the War (fighting with the Soviet army, defeating the Nazis, bravery etc). Even within one family, individuals adopted different strategies for living with their past and remembering or forgetting the details of their experiences.

The exploration, research and commemoration of the Holocaust are novel processes taking shape in Odessa and the greater FSU.¹⁹⁷ As Gitelman points out, "[T]he word *holocaust* does not appear in Soviet literature; only in recent years have words such as 'catastrophe,' 'annihilation' (*unichtozhenie*), or 'kholokaust' (transliterated from English) been used" (1994:141). In Odessa, books on the subject were all published in the years since Ukraine's independence in 1991 and it was only two years ago that the Museum of History of Odessa Jews incorporated a permanent exhibition of Holocaust-related materials. It is the middle-aged and young Odessa Jews (along with a few active survivors, most notably Odessa's primary researcher on the Holocaust, Lionid Dusman) who currently lead most of the research initiatives dedicated to the Holocaust in the city.¹⁹⁸ The annual Holocaust conference also serves as an important

¹⁹⁷ Exploring the subject of the Holocaust in Odessa's public schools, Richardson suggests that, "although silence no longer enveloped the event, there was certainly a 'hush'" (2008:62).

¹⁹⁸ Danya, one of the employees of the Museum of Odessa's Jews, gives lectures on the subject of the Holocaust in the city's public schools throughout the school year. His talks prompt Jewish and non-

platform for Odessa's intelligentsia to address the devastating history of Odessa's occupation. In a lighter atmosphere of dance rehearsals, Odessa's ex prisoners of concentration camps and ghettos meet regularly on the premises of Migdal. Their meetings are mostly recreational but the organization is also responsible for organizing public memorial ceremonies, receiving monetary compensation from the German government and celebrating the more personalized events, for instance the members' birthdays. While the subject of the Holocaust in Odessa has only recently entered into the public discourse of local history, recent developments do allow us to analyze the memory and commemoration of local experiences related to specifically Jewish suffering, loss and trauma but also survival and life, which go beyond the ceremony of the UJC mission.

24 Sokhnut campers pose for a picture with UJC participants holding Israeli national colors

Back at the mission, lightening the heavy atmosphere of the Holocaust ceremony, UJC visitors were asked to think of a bright Jewish future, as the group headed to the

Jewish students to visit the museum and write research papers on various related themes. For the winner of the best project, the director of the museum told me, Danya organizes a private bus tour around "Jewish Odessa" (personal communication with Michael Rashkovetsky 12 December 2010).

Sokhnut summer camp. This would serve as the last stop on the UJC mission, after which the group was flying to Israel.¹⁹⁹ As the last task of the day – and the mission visit – UJC members paired with local youth were asked to gather for a group photograph taken for future UJC publications, a lasting and tangible image that would frame the individual and official memory of the mission. Matching tee-shirts and blue and white balloons were handed out to everyone and, on a count of three, Israel's national colors filled the Odessa sky.

Conclusion

This chapter has addressed the links between cultural display and development projects embedded in Jewish philanthropic travel, showing how Odessa's Jewish experience was multiply transformed as different agents took charge in reworking its past and narrating its present. I have analyzed the ways that Jewish Odessa is presented in various live "performances," and also in print media and websites of international organizations, produced for visiting Jewish delegations, considering the implications of and reactions to these social constructions among the local Jewish contingent. Concentrating on one specific mission as a case study, my aim was to illustrate how international agencies, in following their individual agenda, manipulated the image of local Jewish life to address issues of Jewishness in ways linked to their particular cause in the region. For example, a great deal of philanthropic travel I encountered, and print media such as the brochure quoted at the opening of the chapter, created and supported images of local Jews as victims rescued from the alienation and repressions of the Soviet state.²⁰⁰ The overall efforts of Jewish outreach projects were presented by organizers as a means of securing a bright and meaningful

¹⁹⁹ Golbert presents other examples of American Jewish youth trips that tie the narrative of the Holocaust to the presence of the Jewish state, as organizers of Jewish missions take their participants from Auschwitz and other concentration camps directly to Israel (2001:146 n. 77; also see Gruber (2002: 149).

²⁰⁰ While I do believe that such descriptions reveal a reality encountered by some Soviet Jews, I would argue that most such families and individuals were among the first to leave the Soviet Union and thus were precisely not the Soviet Jews addressed in projects of Jewish development in the FSU.

future for the local Jewish population. In turn, philanthropists walked away with a heightened sense of “satisfaction” (Poppendieck 1998) from the accomplished mission of salvation and an equally elevated sense of moral achievement.

Throughout this chapter, I have demonstrated the overall effort of foreign organizers to bring Odessa’s Jewish population into the greater imagined Jewish community, where emphasis on shared traits, history, customs and culture are accentuated and, correspondingly, details of local character are minimized and underplayed – except as quaint local “color.” Despite these attempts to find, construct or invent connections and relationships between visiting and local Jews, the nature of these missions perpetuated a system of difference and inequality and thus, in my opinion, increased divisions yet to be resolved in the future. The sheer fact of being “donated to” created a sense among local Jews of being “underprivileged Jews,” taught to receive on the basis of being Jewish, that has resulted in structures of dependency. While local Jews occasionally joked about being the underprivileged family members of visiting Jews, they resented others passing such judgment.

For local Jewish activists, foreign aid had significant consequences. Most important, it is hard to break the habit of receiving without the obligation to give back, making it all the more difficult to form a community based on local need, local funds and local values. Given the fact that foreign philanthropists fund most of the Jewish institutions currently serving the local Jewish population, their sustainability remained is largely dependent on future donations from abroad. Moreover, many of the transplanted models of Jewish identification transmitted through educational programs of international agencies have, especially for the young, become familiar and internalized as their own.

Nonetheless, projects directed by Sokhnut and Joint have both undergone cutbacks in light of the recent economic crisis, which has decreased their influence in the region. These recent developments, viewed against the backdrop of local philanthropic efforts

of local well-to-do Jews (some of whom are returnees), do present a question about the sustainability of the present organizational power dynamics witnessed in the FSU.

In the next part I turn my attention to the subject of migration, where I discuss the web of relations that defines Odessa beyond its geographical borders and influences local attitudes and practice. I discuss the various attachments Odessans manifest toward their city, Israel and other destinations and the ways in which migration is rationalized in current post-Socialist settings. The diaspora and home elements of Odessa come to the fore, as residents, returnees and transmigrants described in the next two chapters define their roots and routes.

PART III

Home in the Diaspora

Chapter 6

Migration and Life Abroad: Perspectives on Israel and Other Destinations

"Jewish is not a nationality, it is a mode of transportation."

Popular Soviet joke

An American colleague who heard me speak about the problems of the Jews of the former Soviet Union said to me: "Look we don't have space in our mentality for the image you presented. We see only two scenarios. Either they're hitting you on the head or you're packing your belongings to go to Israel." Such is the stereotypical image, but as with every stereotype it is far removed from reality.

Mikhail A. Chlenov (1994:127)

Introduction

With great difficulty during some periods of Soviet rule, and more freely following its fragmentation, Jewish citizens of the USSR and its subsequent independent states were able to emigrate. As noted in Chapter 3, the breakup of the USSR saw massive efforts by Israeli officials and American Jews that paved the way for one of the largest waves of Jewish emigration to this day. Suddenly the possibility of leaving – to a myriad of destinations – became a reality for ex-Soviet Jews. However, far from everyone took up the opportunity to emigrate, and when they did, Israel was by no means always seen as the obvious place to go. The choice of the Jewish "stay back" population to remain in the FSU baffled many of the human rights crusaders who, ever since the tiny crack in Soviet borders opened in the 1970s, had seen themselves as freeing Jews from Communist repression and anti-Semitism. Emigration from the "land of state sponsored anti-Semitism has been the dominant lens through which everyone has seen Jewish life in Russia" (Aviv and Shneer 2005:29). The fact that most emigrating Jews were choosing destinations other than Israel was also highly

disappointing for Zionists. This chapter is an attempt to grapple with Jewish emigration under Soviet rule and in the post-Soviet period and its consequences for the remaining Jewish population of Odessa. Discussion here also includes accounts of Odessan Jews who have migrated, permanently or temporarily, to Israel and elsewhere.

A central question is why, given the chance to leave, many of Odessa's Jewish population remained. In the light of the ethnographic material presented, the explanation appears to be a complex sense of responsibility, loyalty and attachment. The material also provides some answers as to how the remaining Jews defined their relationship to Israel and how they perceived other potential destinations (mainly USA and Germany) where many of their compatriots had settled. While Jewish emigration from Odessa has greatly decreased in the past five years, the chapter also addresses those who were still in the process of considering or actually emigrating, examining their motivations and circumstances.

Return migration is also considered here, looking at examples of ex-Soviet Jews who were now returning from their once-chosen destinations to their place of origin. Most of these were returnees from Israel (which reflects the proportion who initially emigrated there). This chapter analyzes the diverse and complex relationships return migrants sustained toward their multiple places of belonging, as they reflected on their ideological motives, confronted their nostalgia and contemplated the nature of their return. I also discuss the reactions of the greater Odessan society among whom this group of multicultural Odessans conduct their everyday affairs.

The chapter starts with the historical background of Jewish emigration prior to, during and after the collapse of the Soviet state. Presenting the sociopolitical context of Jewish emigration and Odessa's communities abroad, I then turn my attention to the city's remaining Jews and their varying and multigenerational perspectives on emigration. The concluding part of the chapter analyzes the relationships that local Odessan Jews had with Israel and some of the ways in which attachments to the Israeli state were forged and maintained today. Here, the section on returnees adds another

dimension of Odessan–Israeli relations, as emigrants returned from their assumed “Jewish homeland” to their country of origin to take advantage of new entrepreneurial, educational and personal opportunities or just to feel “at home.”

Placing my research within the larger context of diaspora studies, I end this chapter with an analysis of the homeland–diaspora dichotomy, which is significantly complicated by the case of Odessan Jews and their patterns of migration.

Jewish Emigration: The Historical Picture

Jewish emigration has long been a significant, but episodic, phenomenon in the region. Since the 1880s, as Gitelman states, “no group of Jews has migrated as often, in as great numbers, and with such important consequences as the Jews of Russia and the FSU” (1997:23). In the period between 1881 and 1912 an estimated 1,889,000 Jews emigrated abroad (1997:23). This immense outflow is usually portrayed as flight from social and political persecution, both of which had escalated as of 1881 (Gitelman 1997:25; Zipperstein 1986:20; Dubnow 1918, 2:373), with pogroms across the region. Other scholars, however, point to the fact that large-scale Jewish emigration had in fact begun a decade before the May Laws (1882) and the subsequent pogroms, arguing that it was mainly the result of economic deprivation and population expansion experienced by Russian Jewry at the end of the 19th century (e.g. Frankel 1981:50).

With the coming of the Soviet regime, emigration from the USSR became highly restricted, not only for Jews but for most Soviet subjects. As Siegel explains, the USSR did not want to undermine the image of “a happy Soviet citizen” in the eyes of the rest of the world (1998:3). Others have speculated that the curb on emigration was directly linked to the country’s large and growing labor deficit (Brym and Ryvkina 1994:71–72). Even so, Jewish emigration did not come to a complete halt. During the early phases of Soviet rule, Jews continued to make their way out of the country, mainly to join relatives abroad in so-called “chain migration” (Gitelman 1997).

Most Jewish emigration during the Soviet period occurred during roughly two periods, the 1970s and the 1990s, when the Soviet authorities, under much international pressure, relaxed quotas on Jewish exit visas.²⁰¹ Jews leaving the Soviet Union and heading to Israel were permitted exit visas only on grounds of “family reunification” or “repatriation,” while Jews entering the United States and other Western countries were granted the status of “refugees.”

Soviet migrants of the 1970s

The migrants of early 1970s were, for most part, from peripheral areas of the country, notably the Baltic states, Moldova, Western Ukraine, Western Belarus and Georgia, where assimilation was less widespread (Brym and Ryvkina 1994:15; Gitelman 1997:28). An estimated 100,000 Jews headed exclusively to Israel, primarily for Zionist, religious and ideological motives (Brym and Ryvkina 1994:15; Gitelman 1997:28; Fialkova and Yelenevskaya 2007:2). By the late 1970s, when most of the non-assimilated Jews trying to leave the USSR had either succeeded or been refused an exit visa,²⁰² the character of Soviet Jewish emigration had changed. By 1977, as Brym and Ryvkina (1994) describe, Jewish emigrants from the USSR were no longer inspired by Zionist ideology but by more pragmatic reasons, as signaled by the fact that most Soviet Jews leaving the country on Israeli exit visas were now “dropping out” en route and going to the United States and other Western countries.²⁰³ Gitelman’s research further supports this claim:

After 1976, about 85 per cent of Soviet Jews arriving in America came from Russia and Ukraine. About 90 per cent of those leaving Moscow,

²⁰¹ Lewin-Epstein argues that the volume, composition and destinations of Jewish emigration in the Soviet period were determined by a mix of the external factors (Soviet–US relations, Soviet Middle East policy, the increasing involvement of non-profit and non-state organizations) and internal factors (Soviet state ideology, local manpower requirements and Soviet ethnic policy) (1997:3).

²⁰² According to Siegel, the most common reasons for refusal of exit visas were: possession of state secrets, state interest, unfulfilled military service and the absence of close relatives in Israel (1998:7). The number of *refuseniks* reached more than 11,000 by 1986 (1998:63).

²⁰³ See Dominitz (1997) and Markowitz (1993:265–267) for a close analysis of the “drop out phenomenon” of Jewish migrants from the USSR.

Leningrad, Kiev and Odessa, where Jews were most acculturated, chose the United States not Israel, as their destination. (1997:29; 1988:444)

These emigrants were no longer driven by a myth of return but rather by a myth of a better life outside of the USSR. According to Tolts, nearly 300,000 Jews emigrated from the USSR between 1970 and 1989 and most of them went to the United States (2004:58).

Perestroika migrants of the 1980s–90s

The economic and political crisis that culminated in the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 generated a major emigration upsurge in 1990 and 1991 (DellaPergola 2002). In 1990, a record high of 205,000 Jews left the USSR and nearly 200,000 left the year after (Tolts 2007:293). This mass emigration was triggered first and foremost by the collapse of the USSR and the great level of instability experienced by Jews and others. Many of the 1990s emigrants described leaving their homes in sheer panic; with rumors flying of possible pogroms and a huge sense of uncertainty about their future, they were driven by *stadnoe chustvo* (herd instinct). “Everybody had left and so we left too” (Lebedeva 2001:49).²⁰⁴

Describing the situation in the 1990s, Sergey, one of my informants said, “People were leaving because they finally could leave and not necessarily because they wanted to. They were not sure if the opportunity would present itself again so they wanted to go while the door was open.” Given the previous hiccups of Soviet emigration policy, sudden changes in exit visa regulations were regarded as the norm. Thus, as Sergey pointed out, many Jews felt a sense of time pressure to make their decision and quickly said their farewells to friends and neighbors. Similarly, Lena, a Russian Jewish immigrant from Saint Petersburg residing in Berlin at the time she was interviewed by Belensky and Skolnik, claimed that she and her family never wanted to leave but, after the anti-Gorbachev attempted putsch by “hard line” Communist Party members in

²⁰⁴ In her survey of Jewish migrants in the 1990s, 65-72 percent of respondents offered this as one of the main reasons for their departure.

August 1991, they were scared of being trapped, of “being the last ones” (1998:37). Migrant stories such as these illustrate that it was “push factors,” the destabilization as the USSR fragmented, that drove emigration at that time. This most recent wave of emigrants also faced a change in US immigration laws that came into effect in October 1989 and reduced immigration from the Soviet Union to a quota of 40,000 (some estimate 50,000) refugees a year (Brym and Ryvkina 1994:74; Gitelman 1997:30). Israel thus became the primary destination.²⁰⁵ The other option that opened up for Soviet Jews during that period was Germany. In 1991 Germany opened its borders to Russian Jews (and ethnic Germans) and this swayed tens of thousands to opt for a life in Europe rather than the Middle East.²⁰⁶ This development presented a new obstacle to Jewish *aliyah* to Israel. As Belensky and Skolnik note, “The idea that a number of ex-Soviet Jewish emigrants, now pressured by new US immigration regulations to choose Israel as their destination, would instead opt to go to Germany of all places, clearly affronted Israel’s self-conception as a natural home for Jewish refugees” (1998:30).

It is clear from surveys that Soviet Jews leaving in the 1990s were choosing Israel not necessarily as their desired country of settlement but, rather, falling back on the fact

²⁰⁵ It has been argued that this change in US legislation was carried out under pressure from the Israeli state, whose interests clearly lay in directing the large flow of Soviet Jews to Israel (Siegel 1998:20). A number of my informants also speculated about Israel’s involvement in US immigration laws. Similar conclusions were documented by Flalkova and Yelenevskaya (2007:45) during interviews conducted in Israel. They write, “Most of our interviewees admitted that they had planned to immigrate to America and eventually landed in Israel only because ‘America had closed down.’”

²⁰⁶ Belensky and Skolnik note that Jews from the Soviet Union had been emigrating to Germany since 1989 and even before (in the 1970s and 1980s about 3,000 Jews arrived in West Germany), although the West German government only started officially granting refugee status to Soviet Jews in 1991, including those arriving via Israel (1998:30). Since the implementation of the 1991 Contingency Refugee Act, “about 200,000 Russian Jews migrated to Germany;” however, the law was amended in 2005, which “seriously restrict[ed] Russian Jews’ admission into Germany” (Schoeps and Glöckner 2008:144) by introducing a points system for immigration and other requirements for citizenship. The current position is that the country openly welcomes Russian Jews who are young, skilled, knowledgeable in German and offer potential social capital rather than dead weight. However, victims of Nazi persecution are still exempt from residence and other requirements for naturalization as citizens.

that Israel remained one of the main destinations that kept its doors open to Soviet migrants without strict entrance criteria or a quota.²⁰⁷

Those leaving the USSR faced greater obstacles to departure than those who left after its fragmentation. Soviet policies made emigration an “all or nothing” decision, a one-way ticket, which made it very difficult for people later to reverse their decision to leave. Soviet emigrants were forced to renounce their citizenship²⁰⁸ and officially resign from their workplace, stating their intention to emigrate as the reason. Many of my informants who had been granted an exit visa thus stalled from making the final decision, fearing permanent change in status.²⁰⁹ In many instances, resignation from employment and application for an exit visa were interpreted by the larger society as an act of betrayal and could result in difficult relations among work colleagues and others. On one occasion, I was told about a family where the father, a high official in the KGB, was demoted after his son applied for an exit visa to Israel (which in fact he used to make his way to the United States). The nature of one’s employment, as well as the orientation of one’s work, played an important role in such circumstances. Nina, an artist in her early seventies, told me that many of her colleagues were Jews who themselves had contemplated leaving. She explained, “No one treated you negatively if you told them you were soon to be living abroad. We all understood.”

Today, under Ukrainian legislation citizens of the Ukrainian state are still not permitted to hold dual citizenship. Ex-Ukrainian citizens are, however, allowed to travel back to Ukraine on their travel passports²¹⁰ without a visa. For those wanting to visit the country for a long period of time, there is the option of getting a visa. Recent

²⁰⁷ According to Brym and Ryvkina, in September 1989 97 percent of Soviet Jewish emigrants chose *not* to go to Israel. Following the American restrictions, that proportion fell to about 20 percent and remained at that level until 1991 (1994:74).

²⁰⁸ See Golbert (2001a:347 n. 228) for a detailed description of the Ukrainian state procedure for revoking the citizenship of emigrants leaving for Israel, the USA and Germany.

²⁰⁹ Markowitz also notes that “because one lost one’s citizenship after submitting this application – and one’s job as well – and because one never knew when or if the request to emigrate would be granted, submission of emigration documents was terrifying indeed” (1993:265–266).

²¹⁰ In contemporary Ukraine, as in the rest of the FSU, citizens have two passports: an internal passport that is used for all domestic affairs and a travel passport used for crossing international borders.

legislation allows certain foreigners (citizens of the FSU, Americans and members of the European Union, including ex-Ukrainians who have acquired citizenship of these countries) to travel to Ukraine without a visa for a duration of three months.

In general, citizenship was an issue mainly for the middle and older generations, whose concerns included having a *propiska* (certificate of residency), which guarantees state benefits and authorizes renting or buying a property. Such rules could nonetheless be manipulated. I met a number of Odessan migrants who had managed to retain their Ukrainian passports after acquiring citizenship abroad. For these individuals, swapping passports at the airport became the norm.

Another state regulation previously crucial to migrant experiences concerned property. Emigrants leaving the Soviet Union prior to the privatization processes of the 1990s were made to leave “their” property to the state, as all property officially belonged to the state. On a number of occasions, Odessans and other ex-Soviet immigrants I met abroad, who had left before privatization, expressed a great deal of regret at leaving too early. They felt that they had missed the opportunity to remain connected to their native cities and enjoy the economic benefits available to others who managed to rent or sell their property in today’s market. As we shall see later in the chapter, property businesses set up by well-to-do migrants are one of the ways Odessans abroad collect extra earnings and negotiate their status as immigrants abroad and locals at home.

Between 1989 and 2004, demographers estimate that approximately 1,580,000 ex-Soviet Jews and their relatives emigrated to countries outside the FSU. Most of these migrants, 962,000, found themselves in Israel, while an estimated 320,000 emigrated to the United States and over 210,000 chose Germany (Tolts 2007:293). According to the latest Ukrainian government statistics, from 2001 onward more emigrants went to Germany than to Israel and “Germany became the first ranking receiving country for Jewish emigration from Ukraine” (Tolts 2007:293). Today, Israel, the USA and Germany remain the primary locations of ex-Soviet Jews and their families outside the FSU.

Little Odessas abroad

Historically, emigration from Odessa reflected the pattern visible across the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. The pogroms of 1821, 1859, 1871 and the most severe pogrom, in 1905, were the causes of earlier waves of out migration from the city (see Chapter 1). The events of World War I, the Communist Revolution of 1917 and WWII also served as “push factors” in the emigration of Odessa’s Jews. However, the largest swathes of emigration from the city were the two latest waves described above.

Odessans who left the city in the 1970s and early 1980s mainly chose to go to America. Many of these early migrants were part of the “drop out phenomenon” described above. A large part of this first wave of migrants settled in Brighton Beach, an area known as “Little Odessa,” located in Brooklyn, New York.²¹¹ Smaller populations of Odessans settled around the bay of San Francisco. Some moved to Chicago and Boston and others chose less concentrated immigrant areas around the USA.

A large number of Odessans leaving in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when immigration to the USA was curbed, made their way to Israel where they settled mainly in Netanya, Haifa and Ashdod – cities that attracted Odessans by their proximity to the sea and large Russian-speaking populations. In many cases migrants followed family connections or the advice of friends when deciding on a destination city. For many of the early arrivals, who travelled from Odessa to Israel on the ferry that arrived in Haifa, the decision was made simply by their first point of arrival. Odessa’s Jewish diaspora spread even further as Germany opened its borders in 1991. There, Soviet Jews were spread out around the country by state officials in hopes of

²¹¹ Markowitz (1993:1) notes that about 50,000 Soviet Jews settled in the greater New York City area between 1972 and 1984 alone. As she explains, “The Council of Jewish Federations devised a plan to resettle Soviet Jews throughout the United States in accordance with the proportion of Jews in each region. Thus, New York city, with about 45 percent of the nation’s Jewish population, was allotted 45 percent of Soviet émigrés, followed by Los Angeles and Chicago” (1993:267). Writing in August 1991, she notes that since 1987 “the Soviet immigrant population of New York has almost doubled” (1993:263).

avoiding a “Russian ghetto” and speeding up the process of adaptation to the German way of life.

Perspectives on Emigration Today: To Stay or To Go?

Deciding to stay

“Among the Jews there are the brave and the very brave – the brave leave and the very brave stay.”

Brezhnev-era joke (cited in Gozman 1997:406)

Except for a few elderly Jews, most of the Jewish Odessans I met had at some point seriously entertained the idea of emigration. Some had taken steps toward achieving this aim – exploratory travel, family discussions, information gathering, language training and, in some cases, going as far as attaining refugee or returnee status – but never actually leaving. Their decision to stay was often freighted with personal, familial, professional, economic and social demands or obligations, which they recalled in varying combinations and juxtaposed with prospects of living abroad.

For Odessans contemplating emigration, Israel represented the legally easiest option for leaving their native city but was far from being the most appealing, despite its large Russian-speaking population (approximately 1.5 million) and extended infrastructure of Russian-language institutions. Certainly this was an important consideration that Odessans (especially the elderly) took into account. On the other hand, the fear of living with continuous warfare, difficulty in finding employment, inability to cope with Israel’s climate and finding oneself in a “Russian ghetto” were among the many factors my informants presented as problematic in making Israel their home. The United States remained the primary choice for most Jews if asked where they would want to be, if anywhere abroad. Germany had also become a very popular option, mainly due to the high social benefits, its membership of the European Union and its proximity to Ukraine, which many found reassuring in thinking about starting life anew.

Irina, a young woman in her mid-thirties employed by one of the international Jewish organizations in the city, described her family's decision process:

My parents were seriously contemplating emigrating to the United States after my aunt and uncle left in the early 1990s. But my grandfather became ill and we could not leave him on his own. So we stayed. When his health finally improved, some time had already passed and we felt that there was no real need to leave anymore as things in Odessa had improved.

Irina's statement echoed many other stories of "stay back" Odessans who had earlier considered leaving their native city (notably during the 1990s) but had changed their minds due to improving local social and economic situation.

Gosha, an IT specialist in his late twenties, also shared with me how his family had at one point entertained the possibility of emigration. Gosha's father, a lawyer by training, was a *refusenik* denied an exit visa in the late 1970s; as a consequence of his application to leave he had been fired from his job. In the early 1990s, when emigration became more feasible for his father, who by then had a family, he considered moving to the United States where some of their family had moved two years before. But just around that time, his father had managed to find a lucrative job working in a law firm of his choice. "We already had the refugee status to move to the United States but my parents decided that starting all over in another place would be too difficult, so we decided to stay," Gosha explained. He did not regret his family's decision but thought that living abroad might still be an option for him in the future, although on new terms, as a highly trained professional rather than an ex-Soviet Jewish refugee. His desire to live overseas one day in order to gain work experience was something other Odessans of his age expressed in envisaging their future.

Among Odessans of Gosha's parents' generation and social class, a number of other ex-Soviet Jews who had stayed on described themselves as living comfortable lives (measured on the basis of education, career and overall standard of living). Emma, a woman in her early sixties, told me that she had never felt the need to emigrate. As she saw her situation, she had a respectable and interesting job at Odessa University;

her family owned an apartment and a *dacha* and had a reasonable income that met their needs. Many Odessans of Emma's age and social status expressed the fear that emigration would mean downward social mobility, especially as it would be difficult to learn a new language and options for employment abroad, realistically assessed, would be scarce. For Emma and others, the statement "I will be nobody there" summarized their sense of predicted loss.

When asked, many of these same accomplished individuals acknowledged that they had suffered Soviet anti-Semitic discrimination typically in the form of quotas for Jews in universities and most work places. This was the everyday reality, as many of them pointed out, that had made them strive for assimilation or work harder to achieve their goals; yet it had not swayed them to emigrate. Emma, who herself was never registered as a Jew in her official documents, did not face Soviet policies of discrimination directly, but others did.

Mila told me that she had been denied admission to the Odessa University seven times in a row and was finally admitted on her eighth attempt. Nonetheless, she proudly wrote "Jewish" in all her documents and set her goals high. Being Jewish, as she recalled, made achieving her aspirations much harder but definitely not impossible. In her view, the fact that Jews today held prominent positions in Odessa, that the city's mayor was a Jew, that they no longer faced quotas and were free to walk the streets in religious dress were all good contemporary post-Soviet realities. She was glad that Jews no longer felt that they had to hide their Jewishness and that some even flaunted it with pride. For the non-Jewish majority of Odessans, Mila told me, Jews were seen as enjoying a privileged status, eligible for better social services and emigration that others did not have. "Everybody wants to be Jewish now," Mila concluded after giving examples of non-Jewish Odessans forging their Jewish ethnicity or marrying Jews in order to leave the country.

On a number of occasions "stay back" Jews expressed a great deal of sympathy toward their compatriots abroad who, in choosing to emigrate, were, so to speak, torn from

their *dusha* (soul),²¹² their mentality and the type of social relations they knew at home. Odessa was the city of their family history and personal roots.

As these accounts briefly indicate, emigration is an option that has been considered at some point by many families and individuals in Odessa, with varying considerations either way. Socioeconomic factors in the decision to stay – and the improved socioeconomic climate in the city clearly played a part for some – were intertwined with other concerns involving family, history, personal achievements and attachments to their native city. For most of my informants, it is important to point out, staying home was a privilege guaranteed by their social status. Other, less established, Jews and members of the working class approached emigration differently. The prospect of making a decent living or the loss of employment was a major motivation for working class Jews to seek other destinations.

Deciding to leave

Elena and her husband Konstantin, a man of mixed Russian and Polish descent, were among the few Odessans I met during my fieldwork who were in the process of emigrating from Odessa. I was originally introduced to the couple by a common friend who knew of my research and hoped that I could explain to them why some Odessans are now returning from Israel – their soon-to-be-home. To my surprise, Elena and Konstantin did not need any briefing on the hardships of Israeli life. Through regular phone calls, letters and emails mainly with Elena's family in Beer Sheeva, the couple was well informed about the life of Russian-speaking migrants in Israel.

As well as their frequent communication with family and friends in Israel, the couple had traveled there five times prior to their upcoming emigration and thus, as Konstantin explained, they knew where they were going. Nonetheless, they were both eager to welcome me into their home, feeling that perhaps there was something they

²¹² Here, I am reminded of the slogan of the World *Odessit* Club: "Jews, Russians, Ukrainians Greeks, and Moldovans! What else do you have but Odessa? Especially in your soul? She is your Mother!"

had possibly missed in calculating their decision. After our initial meeting, I visited them on a regular basis, looking forward to their invitations for meals, tea and conversation.

Months passed as Elena kept changing their departure date. She did not want to leave Odessa before the summer (her favorite time of year) but then she did not want to leave in the fall, which she also loved. Imagining her future life in Israel, Elena would often comfort herself by drawing comparisons between Odessa and Netanya, the coastal city where the couple was looking to settle; both, after all, were on the sea.

Beyond such mental remedies for her already visible nostalgia, Elena and her husband also decided on a practical way to maintain their links to Odessa, by keeping their property. As Konstantin explained, they decided to hold on to their apartment to make sure that “the door remains open.” They took to describing their move to Israel as just another trip abroad, albeit for a whole year. “I am not taking my books with me *this time*,” Konstantin told me. “We’ll leave them here with our furniture in the apartment and when we’re back next year we’ll decide what to do with it all.” In his vision of emigration, *this* departure would be followed by the *next*, so this time around still held a sense of reassurance.

Whatever reasons of sentiment there were for retaining the apartment, Konstantin glossed it all with confidence: owning a property in Odessa was a highly profitable business idea that guaranteed frequent travel home and even the possibility of a splendid summer vacation on the funds collected. “Now people in Odessa own up to eight apartments each and they don’t even live here,” he brought to my attention. November came, and they finally found a tenant for their apartment (ironically enough, a family returning from Israel) and at last booked their tickets to Tel Aviv (paid for by the local branch of Sokhnut). They did not have a big farewell, just a few close friends invited for dinner. Leaving Odessa in 2006 rather than early 1990s, their departure seemed less emotionally taxing and less permanent – both for themselves and for their friends and family – than earlier accounts of departees who were leaving “forever.” Yet, for all the provisional and even hesitant character of Elena and

Konstantin's emigration discourse and behavior, other details spoke of a permanent departure from the city. Not long before she left, Elena made a trip to Kherson, her mother's native city, to visit her grave. "I wanted to properly say my goodbyes," she told me. "I know I am making plans to come back but you never know what can happen." Concerned about her health and Israel's security issues, she did actually envision her emigration from Odessa as possibly permanent.

When I asked Elena why she was leaving, I sensed by her hesitancy that the answer was perhaps difficult to formulate. She told me:

You know, we're not getting younger. Konstantin is 71 now and who will take care of us if something happens to us here? We don't have medical insurance and all of the good doctors have already left [gone abroad]. We can't be a burden on our children and we don't want to be alone.²¹³

In tune with her extremely positive outlook on life, Elena also described the move to Israel as a new opportunity and a chance to see the world. "Sometimes it's good to change things in life. It allows you to meet new people, see new things and test yourself as a person."

Spending time with Elena and Konstantin prior to their departure gave me many insights into present-day concerns that Jewish (and non-Jewish) Odessans had about leaving their home and some of the ways they interpreted and rationalized emigration abroad. At the same time, living through the process of planning their departure allowed me to explore some of the tactics Odessans used in building and securing socioeconomic networks with their native city while residing abroad. In organizing their departure, Elena and her husband did not strike me as feeling rushed or pressured by their environs (only their age). Unlike those experiencing the "one-way ticket" emigration of the Soviet era, the couple represented a case of migrants who were able to test their status abroad while securing their status at home.

²¹³ Hegner also documents the strong pull of family ties for elderly Russian Jews in Chicago, many of whom say that their sole reason for emigration was to follow their children and not be left alone (2000:5).

I found similar economic activity among a number of migrants who were able to afford emigration without selling their property, by renting out their apartments and *dachas* and collecting the rent on their annual trips home. Two of my friends in the city lived in an apartment owned by Odessans residing in Germany. According to their agreement, every summer they had to vacate the apartment for one month when the owners returned to the city for their holidays.

Elena and Konstantin's dispersed family and transnational kin networks were also features that recurred with many of the Jewish Odessans I met in the field. Everyone I knew had a relative or a friend abroad and, in many cases, in more than one location. Odessa's Jewish diaspora now spanned many countries and continents and surpassed the number of Odessan Jews at home. Granted, the case of Elena and Konstantin captures a specific age group and social class of Odessans and concerned migration to Israel specifically, many of the conclusions that I have drawn from their case nonetheless help us understand Jewish emigration as an idea, a concern and a process as it is envisioned and sometimes executed by present-day Odessans.²¹⁴

Thinking about Israel

As a result of the last wave of Jewish emigration in the late 1980s and 1990s, Israel now hosts the largest number of ex-Soviet Jews outside the FSU. Almost as many Odessan Jews live in Israel as in Odessa.²¹⁵ It should come as no surprise then that many of my informants had family members or friends who had immigrated to Israel in the 1990s and earlier. For the most part, these migrants had decided to remain in Israel; however, a number of families had used emigration to Israel as the springboard

²¹⁴ Unfortunately, during my stay I did not meet or hear of anyone leaving for the United States or Germany. Besides Elena and Konstantin I knew of only two other individuals who emigrated to Israel during my fieldwork.

²¹⁵ According to the statistics of the Israeli Ministry of Absorption of Immigration, 20, 447 Jews and their families arrived from Odessa between 1989 and 2006.

for an alternative destination (often Canada,²¹⁶ Australia or the United States). Some had chosen to return home.

This chapter examines how two groups think about Israel: Odessans who have never left the city and those who, having spent some time in Israel, have since returned. For the former, I am interested in documenting how and by what means ideas about and attachments to Israel were forged in private and public domains and what they entailed. For the latter, returnees mainly from Israel, I was interested to know how their sense of belonging to Israel and Odessa had been shaped and possibly altered by their sojourn in the Middle East. “Stay back” and returning Odessan (or FSU) Jews envisioned their relationship to Israel in a variety of different and at times conflicting ways that challenge the homeland–diaspora dichotomy and give some new directions to the theoretical and ideological pictures of the relationship between the Jewish diaspora and Israel.

For middle-aged and elderly Odessan Jews, Israel was perceived first and foremost through the filter of family and friendship networks, which provided personalized information about the socioeconomic situation faced by Russian-speaking Israelis. Those who could afford it opted to test their visions of emigration first hand by visiting kin. Among this age group, discourse about Israel did not feature a Zionist orientation, as it did for many of the younger Odessans affiliated with Jewish programs. Personal attachments and practical considerations seemingly prevailed over ideological connections Jews might feel to their “homeland.”

Mila, mentioned earlier in this chapter, lived in Odessa with her mother. Her only son, Mendy, had emigrated to Israel in 1997 where he still lived today. Originally, Mila had thought that her son would return to Odessa. She told me that the thought of joining her son has crossed her mind a number of times but life in Israel was difficult for her to imagine. “I feel much more at home in Odessa, where I was born and raised.”

²¹⁶ See the article “New Promised Land for Russian Israelis: Canada” featured in the *Jewish Russian Telegraph*, http://www.jrtelegraph.com/2007/02/new_promised_la.html (last accessed 03.23.2007).

Elaborating on her sense of identity, Mila said, "If someone asked me if I was part of the Russian *narod* [people] I would say 'yes' because I was raised in Russian culture and literature and I know it [Russian culture] much better than I know Jewish culture."²¹⁷ I know Israeli history, major holidays ... but it is not the same thing."

Mila's mother, a woman in her late seventies, told me that she could not imagine herself leaving at her age. The fact that her husband and other members of her family were buried in Odessa's Jewish cemetery entailed a sense of personal responsibility for her. However, Israel still remained within her peripheral vision because her grandson lived there. While Mila kept to her promise to visit her son once a year, her mother has never been to Israel. Both of them relied on the fact that it was easier for him to visit them and anxiously awaited his every return.

More so for Mila than her mother, Israel was a place of familiarity. She connected it first and foremost with her son but also with her job at the Israeli Cultural Center. Before she got this job, she had known very little about Israel. "I knew Israel existed and that was that," she openly declared. Even though Israeli life was now a regular topic of conversation at their house, for both Mila and her mother Israel lacked the "nostalgic pull of a physical home" (Golbert 2001:378) reserved for their native land and city. "Odessa is a special place," Mila explained. "It's small, it's familiar, it's homely, it's mine. You can't compare it to other cities, even in Russia or Ukraine."

I met Mila's son, Mendy, on one of his visits home. Like many others, he had been originally introduced to the idea of living in Israel as a teen through Sokhnut's summer camp and later through his association with Betar, where Zionist Ideology was actively promoted. "This was something I understood only later," he explained. "No one told you directly you had to go to Israel but everything pointed in that direction." Back then, as Mendy explained, his emigration to Israel was a natural move in identifying

²¹⁷ A survey conducted by Brym and Ryvkina indicated that 31 percent of their respondents in Moscow, Kiev and Minsk who were planning to emigrate chose countries other than Israel because they would find it too difficult to live in an atmosphere of Jewish culture or to learn Hebrew (1994:80–81).

himself as a Jew, part of his search for a more meaningful Jewish life. While Mendy would no longer give his reasons for living in Israel in terms of a Zionist myth of return, today he had other reasons and Israel remained his home.

Given the nature of emigration to Israel, where a great many migrants were young people involved in religious or secular Zionist organizations who left on their own initiative, the scenario of parents and grandparents left behind was not uncommon in Odessa. In these circumstances, emigrants' families were often as concerned with events in Israel as with Ukrainian news. Fears about safety and terrorism figured large and these trepidations became all the more ominous where children or grandchildren were serving in the Israeli army or when war conflicts arose.

The image of Israel as a war zone where terrorism touches the lives of Israeli citizens on a daily basis was shared by a number of parents who felt that their children had made a mistake in emigrating there. Equally, it led many to object to their children participating in Jewish organizations in Odessa, fearing that this would persuade them to move to Israel. One extreme case was that of Roma, whose parents' fear that he might want to go to Israel led them to taboo completely any mention of the very fact that they were Jewish.

Equally uninterested in migrating to Israel were some religious Jews, who did not wish their children to be brought up and educated according to the too secular norms of Israeli society. According to Maya, Israel lacked the appropriate type of discipline, schooling and personal relations that her son could experience in Odessa. Now that Odessa had all the institutions and conditions necessary to live an observant Jewish life, staying was a comfortable option for many religious Jews.

Odessa's Jewish youth, like their parents and grandparents, formed their ideas about Israel on the basis of personal networks with peers and family abroad. Twenty-year-old Svetlana, whose sister lived in Tel Aviv, often spoke to me about Israel as a place where she had family. Her numerous visits to the country had left her with mixed feelings about the reality of living there, associated with the hardships of her sister's

life. Along with her parents, she often followed news about Israel on the television or the radio, expressing concern for her sister's wellbeing.

Young Jews affiliated with Jewish institutions were exposed to images of Israel outside their home and family networks. Less filtered through the medium of personal relationships, these institutional discourses tend to be more "informational," more direct and more elaborate. For all their differences, these institutions, whether secular, religious or Zionist, invoked Israel as linked to the Jewish people as a whole. The attachment to Israel promoted through such institutional affiliations was thus dissimilar to that summoned up through family and personal links, where connections were often framed with reference to specific individuals.

A number of Zionist organizations such as Sokhnut and Betar facilitate immigration to Israel as a means of deepening one's sense of being a Jew. For the younger generation perceptions of Israel were frequently shaped by personal experiences of travel to Israel, most often as participants of various travel, study and work abroad programs. These schemes were offered specifically to youth and designed to promote *aliyah*. Short trips had become increasingly popular among Odessa's Jewish youth, who took up the opportunity to visit Israel, sampling its social and political life without committing to immigration (Golbert 2001:339). Among the most popular programs on offer, which many of my friends attended, was Taglit. A 13-day trip taking in Israel's most picturesque destinations in the company of other young people left many young Odessan Jews with fond memories of "their" country and the will to go back. As Karina remembered her Taglit experience:

When I landed at Ben Gurion [airport] it felt like I was coming home after some 20 years of being away ... When you learn so much about it [Israel], when you read all those books, when you teach others about it, when you finally get there, it is such an overwhelming feeling of being in a familiar place. It is your imaginary castle built especially for you where you feel like a princess. I couldn't wait to tell everyone about it.

Stories, pictures, music and anecdotes about Taglit experiences are part of the shared discourse that linked past participants and motivated others to go. At the same time,

many of the Jewish youth in Odessa described having to defend their views about Israel to other friends and their family on their return. In Karina's case, her parents did not understand how she could relate so closely to a country she had visited only once; her friends, only half jokingly, accused her of being "brainwashed."

Karina's experience echoed that of others who found themselves confronted with alternative points of view when they came back. It would take Karina another, lengthier, trip to Israel to make her decision about *aliyah*. "Israel is something special," she told me. "You can't compare it to other countries. But life is not anything like it is described to be in the books." Like many others who experienced Israel initially as a visitor, Karina recognized the distinction between tourism and emigration. She ultimately based her decision on her subsequent longer stay in the country and the stories of other not so well-to-do migrants she knew. In general, I found that participants in extended Israeli programs expressed diverse views on Israel, including feelings of attachment but also displacement and sometimes utter disappointment (see also Markowitz 1997).

Karina's status as a non-*halakhic* Jew and a Russian speaker, and knowing that her family would not consider emigrating to Israel themselves, were all reasons Karina presented in favor of her decision to stay. She was the only one in her family who favored Judaism over Russian Orthodoxy and held Israel close to her heart. Her step-father, a practicing Christian, was an influential figure in the lives of Karina's mother and brother – who regarded themselves as being "far from all things Jewish." Moreover, Karina had a career in film that was too important to her to sacrifice by emigrating. On the other hand, Karina's was the last generation in her family who qualified for the Right of Return and she saw this as entailing a great deal of responsibility to secure a Jewish future for her children and a connection with their Jewish "homeland." Like others who had only recently learned of their Jewish links through Israeli-based organizations but lacked the maternal link recognized by the religious authorities in Israel, Karina also knew the limitations of her Jewish inheritance.

While a number of crisscrossing motives were at work in any one decision Jewish Odessans like Karina made about Israel, barely anyone I met during fieldwork had been swayed by their experience in or ideas about Israel to take the step of actually relocating there. Statistics provided by the Israeli Consulate support this observation as they show a great decrease in the number of exit visas granted to residents of the Odessa region.²¹⁸ It is thus fair to conclude that, in the face of pragmatic concerns, the ideological sentiments some Odessan Jews felt toward Israel did not ultimately have a great impact on their decision whether to emigrate. Moreover, since emigration from Odessa was no longer the “now or never” decision it appeared to be in the 1990s, many young people felt comfortable knowing they could decide to emigrate at a later point. “I feel that Israel will always be there,” Igor explained on his return from a six-month study abroad program. “No one is taking away my right to repatriate but now I don’t want to be there.”

For other young people I met, the possibility of moving to Israel offered a path to independent living and a chance to experience life abroad, for which Taglit trips served as a free trial. In discussing all the possibilities she and her boyfriend were willing to take up, Anna said:

Misha and I are thinking of going to Israel. Through Sokhnut we can move there for free. Misha’s grandparents live there and they can possibly help him find a job and let us stay with them. I would like to go on Taglit just to see it, I have never been.

Living in a similar family structure to Karina, Anna was aware that she would probably be the only one in her immediate family to live in Israel and recognized that her family would strongly disapprove. She balanced these concerns against the fact that Israel was a place where Misha and she could start a life of their own, enjoying the freedom of living without their parents’ direct supervision. Even though Anna dedicated much time to considering this decision, the couple never made any concrete plans to leave.

²¹⁸ In 1999, a total of 4,041 exit visas were granted to residents of the Odessa region. By the year 2006 the number barely exceeded 300.

For students at Jewish schools, Israel's biblical and contemporary history was part of the curriculum, while the idea and place of Messianic and ancient Israel was reinforced in daily prayer. The Litvak Orthodox movement sent many of their students to *yeshivas* and other religious institutions offering programs of intense Jewish education that are also pivoted on the idea of *aliyah*. The presence of Israeli religious families as educators and spiritual leaders for many of Odessa's Jewish youth enrolled in Jewish schools also offered another mode of contact with Israel.

Taken overall, Odessa's "stay back" population was exposed in a whole variety of ways to visions of Israel as a locus of attachment. Yet it was only for a minority of local Jews that Israel was defined as homeland or as a land of affluence compared to Odessa. For the majority, any relationship to Israel was defined by personal ties with relatives and friends who lived there and the attachment felt was not perceived as embedded in their Jewish identity. Given the size of the Odessan population in Israel, a large number of local families supported Israel as a state and cared greatly about its current events and safety. Ideological ties to Eretz Israel were found mainly among affiliated Jews of the younger generation. Even among this group, however, Zionist orientations in Odessa took the form of loving Israel from far. As one of my informants put it, "Being in Israel is like being with your mother. There is nothing better but you can only take so much." Israel remains one of the possible destinations for emigration but today, as for many years, facing great competition from Germany and the United States – and, more important, the choice to remain in Odessa. As this chapter also indicates, practical considerations associated with life in Israel today play a much greater role in perceptions of emigration to Israel than Zionist motives. Finally, the growing trend of return migration reveals a new host of relationships between Odessa and Israel, with some people worn down by their experiences in Israel and very happy to come back to their familiar world, some reflecting the new transnational fluidity of migration where no one place is truly "home," while others were so highly shaped by their experiences abroad that their behavior on return took a variety of, sometimes surprising, turns – but in all cases the actual act of return to Odessa signaled to the "stay back" minority that Odessa remained a meaningful home.

Returnees, Transmigrants and Long-Term Visitors in Odessa

The re-migration of ex-Soviet Jews back to their former countries of residence or other destinations within the FSU was a relatively new phenomenon. For the most part returnees arrived from Israel although some returned from the United States, Germany, Australia and other destinations. Throughout my interviews, meetings and interactions with returnees, I was keen to find out how their time abroad had shaped their relationship with Israel, Ukraine, Odessa and Jewish Odessa and whether their sojourns abroad had had an effect on the type of relationships they forged with local Jews and others on their return. It was the subject of belonging that originally drew me to studying returnees who had tasted living in the Jewish "homeland" and then chosen to leave it. On their return, they were also confronted with a new political regime and social order affecting both Jewish and non-Jewish circles in Odessa. This section addresses these issues and analyzes the divergent Jewish-Israeli relations visible in Odessa today, including the perspectives of returnees.

The return migration of ex-Soviet Jews from Israel has recently captured the attention of politicians, scholars of Russian Jewish affairs and journalists across the globe. As Aviv and Sheer document for Russia, relying on a report released by the Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia, "for the first time in history, more Russian Jews now migrate to Russia from Israel than the other way around" (2005:49).²¹⁹ Officials of the Israeli state have expressed concern about a possible Russian "brain drain" (Ash 2004). Israeli sociologists insisted that many of the returnees were not "failed cases of *aliyah*" (individuals who were unable to adapt to an Israeli way of life) but, rather, young, well educated and capable individuals whose skills could not be accommodated in Israel's limited market and had reached a "glass ceiling."²²⁰ Meanwhile, some social scientists,

²¹⁹ According to this report, "About fifty thousand Jewish former emigrants to Israel have returned to Russia since 2001. Over the same period only about thirty thousand Russian Jews have left for Israel" (Oslpovich 2004:36 quoted in Aviv and Shneer 2005:49).

²²⁰ Personal notes from the conference "Russian-Speaking Jewry in the Global Perspective: Power, Politics and Community held October 17–19 at Bar Ilan University in Israel. See also

journalists and their readers expressed “surprise” at this new development (see Friedgut 2007:266)²²¹ – for the old narratives of Soviet repression are still very much in force.²²²

Among the group of returnees I met were people who simply never managed to find their way in Israel and, facing economic, social, or personal constraints, decided to return. Such so-called “failed cases of *aliyah*” were young Jews who had set off on their own and found it difficult to survive without their family’s support. In other instances, elderly Odessans now found themselves too dependent on others for communication and everyday tasks, or middle-aged migrants struggled to make a living. There were also cases of well-to-do migrants lured back to Odessa by business opportunities. To this particular group of “opportunity seekers,” life in Israel presented no obstacles of acclimatization: the choice to leave was because of better prospects abroad. These “returns” were often non-permanent, with individuals frequently traveling back and forth. This group, whom I shall call “transmigrants,” divided their time between multiple destinations with split business and family commitments.

Opportunities attracting (non-returnee and returnee) Israelis to Odessa also included education and forms of community service.²²³ Returnees, transmigrants and long-term

<http://www.jewishtimes.com> subheading Israel News on 27th October 2006 (last accessed 12.01.2009); Finkel (2004).

²²¹ For an extended list of articles dealing with ex-Soviet Jewish remigration from Israel to FSU see http://www.ncsj.org/AuxPages/080404_return.shtml; also http://www.jewishla.org/federationinforcus/html/apr05_ifishel.html; <http://www.nysun.com/article14147>. For returnees from the USA see <http://www.businessweek.com/1997/25/b353252.html>.

²²² See, for example, article titles such as “Return of the Jews: For decades the story of Russia’s Jews has been one of fear and flight to Israel. Now many are coming home” (*Newsweek International* 08.09.2004) and “Once desperate to leave, now Jews are returning to Russia, land of opportunity” (*The Times* 04.28.2005). At the same time, new stereotype are propagated in which returnees “galvanize Jewish community life” (Jewish Telegraph Agency 08.26.2004) and “revive Jewish culture” (*Los Angeles Times* 02.03.2005).

²²³ Odessa was home to a number of Russian-speaking Israelis who had come to the city to study medicine and other professions. In the synagogue a number of religious families were also Israeli “returnees,” who had come to Odessa with the specific goal of aiding the community in religious education and practice. For the most part they worked in the Jewish schools and other educational

visitors whom I met were not all originally from Odessa. In some circumstances, “returnees” were natives of other cities of the FSU drawn to Odessa by a personal or professional connection. Nor were they all returning from the same country: mainly from Israel, a smaller percentage from Germany and a few from the United States. This pattern may be explained by the fact that “migration to the USA and Germany usually entails inter-generational families, rather than individual Jewish youth and young couples, as is frequently the case with Israel” (Golbert 2001a:347). Another factor explaining the low frequency of returns from the USA is the distance and cost of travel. While visits from Germany were very common,²²⁴ permanent returns are less frequent.

Nina and her son, Kostya, were among the first returnees from Israel I met in the city. They themselves did not know of any others who had returned.²²⁵ Leaving Odessa in 1989, Nina had returned in 2000 and her son followed a year later. Telling me about their initial departure, she said:

Many of my students left and were persuading me to go. You had to know what Odessa was like during those years [1990s] ... It was very difficult to live here. There were no lights on the streets, darkness everywhere, extremely high prices and nothing, absolutely nothing, in

institutions. Sokhnut also sponsored a number of Russian-speaking Israelis who usually held one- to two-year posts working as counsellors and educators for Jewish youth.

²²⁴ Belensky and Skolnik document that 92 percent of ex-Soviet Jews in Germany have traveled back to their home towns compared with 9 percent in the United States and 19 percent in Israel. No data is provided in their work on permanent returns from Germany to the FSU (1998:37).

²²⁵ Satanovsky, a local Jewish activist in Moscow, recently noted that over 100,000 Russian Jews have returned to their countries of origin or other industrial centers and capital cities in the FSU http://ejc.org/page_34/news14038.html (last accessed 11.24.2009). Currently, the number of returnees from Israel exceeds immigrants (Finkel 2004:329). Unlike other larger communities of Israeli returnees that can be found in major economic hubs of the FSU, including Moscow (with an estimated 50,000–60,000) (Fiedgut 2007:266), returning Odessans did not form any sort of an organized network or community. Official statistics on return migrants are much debated. Russian and Ukrainian authorities track return migrants based on their registration with the local passport office when they resume residence status in their country of their return. According to these calculations, provided by Tolts (2007:297), in 2004 immigration as a percent of emigration reached 37 percent in Russia and 30 percent in Ukraine. However, these statistics are of limited value since a number of returnees do not register officially with the state authorities. Also, statistics provided by the Israeli government identify returnees as such only once they have remained abroad for more than one year and hence automatically exclude “transmigrants,” which, as cases in this chapter show, includes many Russian-speaking Israelis who frequently travel back to Israel for personal and work-related reasons.

grocery stores. People spoke of pogroms. Only later I understood that it was just rumors.²²⁶ Unfortunately I was one of those people who did not withstand social pressure.

She left her apartment to her elder son, resigned from work and parted from her native city. In her mind, she was leaving forever.

She now reflected on her time in Israel with mixed emotions. At first amazed at the generosity of the Israeli immigration and relocation personnel, who were dealing with an overwhelming number of ex-Soviet Jews, Nina had soon become disillusioned with the reality of life in Israel (for similar accounts see Siegel 1998:92–99). “In Odessa, Israeli emissaries promised me that I would have no problem finding employment upon arrival but no one told me that at my age [55] I was already considered retired. It was clear that they only wanted the young.” For the first 11 months, Nina was given an art studio where she and other immigrant artists made objects that they later sold at various fairs. Eventually, she and the others were asked to leave the studio and Nina, on her own initiative, started teaching ceramics to a group of elderly blind Israelis.

She struggled economically for all the 11 years she spent in Israel as she and her son changed jobs, apartments and cities in order to make ends meet. Nina also suffered from the Israeli climate, especially the unbearable summers. At the same time, she spoke of Israel as a “holy place” where she could feel history, see breath-taking landscape and take in the presence of God. In Israel, Nina started attending religious services, not a synagogue but a Russian Orthodox Church, which she described as being “culturally close” to her. She recalled meeting a number of other Jews during services who were *vykresty* (baptized Jews). (Another returnee, Oleg, had a similar religious experience in Israel, where he realized the importance of having God in his

²²⁶ Nina speculated that such rumors were spread by state representatives and others who were interested in the property and belonging of Jews, which many left behind when they emigrated. She also hinted that Zionists working in the city were involved. At the same time, she acknowledged that local Jews themselves feared that a time of instability in Ukraine might result in anti-Jewish sentiment with Jews scapegoated for the troubles of the state. I met other families in Israel who spoke of similar rumors in Kiev.

life through his interaction with the Russian Orthodox Church. When he returned to Odessa, he was baptized and more recently has had his son baptized. Oleg had returned after surviving a terrorist attack and losing a close friend of his family.)

While Nina had formed some attachment to Israel, in the end it was not enough to make her stay. She recalls feeling a great nostalgia for Odessa and Odessans, which strongly influenced her decision to return. She was one of the few returnees I met who, on coming home opted to change her Israeli passport for a Ukrainian one, which she needed in order to receive a pension and acquire a *propiska*. (Most returnees held tight to their Israeli passports for travel purposes and also for the advantages of having an alternative country of residence.)²²⁷

When I asked Nina how others in the city interpreted and reacted to her return, she had little to say. "I don't tell many people about it," she explained, adding, "I don't want to brag about living abroad." Her shyness about her Jewish identity was seemingly also bound up with this concern about having lived something others could not. One evening she shared with me a painful incident when one of her neighbors called her a *zhidovka*. Nina insisted that the woman was simply acting out of jealousy. "She knew that I used to live in Israel ... I wish I had never told her, because I could tell it aggravated her to know I had a chance to do something she can't." Nina was also convinced no true *Odessit* would fling such an anti-Semitic insult; such "provincial" behavior suggested that the neighbor was a newly arrived migrant to the city.

Her son, Kostya, had never experienced any such negative reactions to himself as a returnee. Rather, "The people I told about Israel were always curious to know more." Kostya was nearly 18 when he followed his mother to Israel. Soon after his arrival he had been admitted into one of Tel Aviv's leading art institutes, which he attended for several months but eventually left because he needed a job. Within a year of his arrival, he had been drafted into the Israeli army. After nearly ten years in the country,

²²⁷ Citizens of Ukraine need a visa for most destinations outside the FSU, which can be time-consuming and costly. Israeli citizenship facilitates less restricted travel and an easier visa application process.

Kostya had never managed to gain a degree or master the Hebrew language fluently, which had greatly limited his employment opportunities. He turned to various intermittent manual jobs. Despite all these struggles, he saw his time in Israel in a positive light as being extremely meaningful.

Four years after returning, Kostya still defined Israel as his *rodina* (homeland) and held on to his Israeli passport. The idea of eventually going “home” (to Israel) was a recurrent theme in his conversation, to the great irritation of his mother each time he voiced such thoughts aloud. His long absence from Odessa meant that Kostya felt little, if any, connection to the city, the place where he was born and partially raised. Had he managed to find permanent employment or forge meaningful friendships on his return he might have felt more rooted. (Kostya returned to Israel a couple of months before I left the field, although without any settled prospects there.)

During the year before I met him, Kostya had become more observant of Jewish religious laws and regularly attended the synagogue – neither of which had been part of his life in Israel. Once back in Odessa, however, he found that he wanted to combat “assimilation.” Defining himself as an Israeli, he was also starting to define himself as a *iudei*. (Other returnees from Israel behaved similarly. Marat, for example, explained, “In Israel I did not do anything Jewish, you don’t need to. But when I came back I started doing little things with the Chabad congregation. Here I felt that it was nice to keep traditions.”)

Nina’s and Kostya’s generational differences in affiliation to Jewish Odessa were not atypical among returnees. Older returnees tried to ease back into their old lives almost unnoticed and usually avoided official affiliation (except for the sake of social benefits such as pensions). The behavior of middle-aged returnees was largely determined by the nature of their employment and family circumstances. Some, seeking career benefits, used Jewish organizations to network, especially for possible clients; others, seeing no advantages, did not include Jewish gatherings in their busy routines. For families whose children were enrolled in Jewish schools, occasional Jewish activity was the norm, which sometimes led to more extended involvement

while others felt too constrained by lack of time or simply lack of interest. Most younger returnees strove to practice their Hebrew, take part in Jewish holiday celebrations and often found employment in Jewish organizations, while others chose to remain on the periphery of Jewish activities.

One of my informants, Nastya, who had returned from Israel after nine years living in Tel Aviv, said that she could not relate to Jewish life in Odessa as it was too religious. A young woman in her late twenties, she had moved back to Odessa in late 2006 mainly to live closer to her family. Her first encounter with Israel had been on a study abroad program and, there and then, she had decided to emigrate. At the age of 15 she had made *aliyah*, leaving her sister and parents behind in Odessa. Before the move, she had been very involved in the Jewish life of the city, participating in programs offered by Sokhnut and Migdal. However, during her time in Israel, her passion for being an active Jew had slowly faded. As Nastya saw it, when you move to "Zion," acting out your Jewishness no longer seems important.

Returning to Odessa, she had not opted to rekindle her old connections with Odessa's Jewish circles. She looked down on Sokhnut's policy of, as she put it, "force-feeding Jews fairytales" about their "home." Equally, nothing about the religious world struck a chord with her present Jewish identification. The new outlook she had adopted abroad now made "stay back" Jews seem "too Jewish," "narrow and old fashioned." In *Coming Home*, Long and Oxfeld (2004) similarly point out that "as the act of returning unfolds, the specific experiences often contrast with the returnee's original dreams" (2004:10). In the same book George Gmelch describes how Barbadian returnees "feel that their own interests are more cosmopolitan and transcend [those of] the local community;" the place now appears as "narrow" (2004:213). This was Nastya's experience, as I saw it.

Living at home with her parents was also something Nastya spoke about with some agitation. Her independent ways of living were at odds with the rules her parents set for her and her sister; she was not used to answering to anyone or even sharing a room (with her sister). Other young returnees also experienced strained family

dynamics. Regina, a returnee from Haifa, told me she had difficulty living with her mother-in-law, with whom she was forced to share an apartment upon her return. Family circumstances were also an issue after migration to Israel, where family reunification often did not meet migrants' expectations.

Nastya struggled to find her way among family and friends. Most of her peers who had stayed in Odessa had graduated from college and found employment. Many of her old girlfriends were also married and starting their own families. By contrast, Nastya was single, had "lost two years to the army" and, despite her sustained efforts to work and study at the same time, had not managed to complete her college education in Israel. In Odessa, where most education is still free of charge, continuing higher education appeared more feasible. Within a month of her return, Nastya had managed to register for several classes at the Engineering Institute of Odessa where, as far as I am aware, she is still enrolled today.

Transmigrants

While some returnees intended their re-migration to be permanent, others did not. This group of transnational migrants or "transmigrants," as I am calling them, defined their relationship with Odessa as one of partial belonging and residency.

Dima, his wife, Luba, and their two children came to Odessa in the last two months of my fieldwork, having previously lived in Israel for ten years. They had decided to move to Odessa in order to grow their business of selling *Herbalife* products, Israeli-made food supplements and skin care goods. They regularly travelled to and from Israel, as well as across Ukraine, in order to satisfy work and family obligations. They missed Israel for its food, music and natural beauty. Dima and Luba retained their Israeli citizenship, with Ukrainian resident visas securing permission to work. Although their primary identification was as being Israeli, Odessa, Dima's native city, served as a convenient business base in the region. The fact that Dima's mother lived in Odessa and was available to mind their children made it easier for them to manage. As Dima put it:

It is easy for me to come back to the Ukraine as opposed to moving to Canada, which is where my wife and I originally wanted to go once we decided to expand our business. In Odessa I know everyone that I need for any given situation and I feel free. In Israel, starting your own business is difficult especially as an immigrant.

Other entrepreneurs I met had similar experiences of conducting business overseas. Vova, a returnee from Haifa, told me of the difficulties he had faced setting up a business in Israel. "You can't trust anyone in Israel," he told me. "I had a business with a Moroccan guy but he cheated me out of all my money." Described his motivation in coming to Odessa, and his plans for the future, he was clear: "I am here to make money." Two months into his stay, he was working hard to open a hummus restaurant. He had attended a number of Jewish functions in the city and openly approached the Chabad rabbi to ask him for help in his entrepreneurial efforts. According to Vova, the rabbi knew a good many local businessmen whom he could possibly turn to for funding. Vova was originally from Saint Petersburg, while his wife, Nadya, was a native of Odessa. The deciding factor as between the two cities was that in Odessa there was an apartment available for their use. Also, having visited Odessa many times over the years they had lived in Israel, Nadya was quite certain that she would be able to get a job in one of the city's Jewish organizations, where her Hebrew language skills would be in demand.

Like Nadya, many people who are considering returning from Israel first make a number of preliminary visits to their potential destination. Yulik, originally from the Ukrainian town of Dnipropetrovs'k and currently living in Israel, was making such an exploratory visit to Odessa when I met him. Like Vova and Nadya, he was attracted to Ukraine for its business potential, in his case IT. Originally planning to relocate to Kiev, Yulik was now leaning toward a smaller city such as Dnipropetrovs'k or Odessa, where the IT industry was not nearly as saturated as it was in Ukraine's capital. Yulik's family in Ukraine had offered to help him get started, if he was able to provide the finance. Unfortunately, when visiting his "home town," he had found that Dnipropetrovs'k did not feel anything like home. Having spent most of his life in Israel, he felt like a foreigner. He spoke Russian with a Hebrew accent and had no knowledge of

Ukrainian. His diet, dress and mannerisms were all marked by his experience abroad. Nonetheless, Yulik felt a sense of curiosity in seeing a life that he was both close to and distant from.

The same tone inflected the stories of many other returnees. Those coming back to Odessa described it as a place known and simultaneously unknown. "In the course of [their] protracted absence" (Stefansson 2004:4) their home had almost inevitably undergone significant change while they too had formed new habits and ways of thinking in the context of different resources and realities. For some, this made living in Odessa interesting, for others difficult to cope with. "[H]omecoming often contains elements of rupture, surprise, and perhaps disillusionment, besides the variety of practical problems that returnees usually confront" (Stefansson 2004:4). It would possibly be premature to judge the success of these returns. In all but the case of Nina, who had reverted to a Ukrainian passport, all of them could easily have opted to go back to Israel on their retained citizenship and legal documents. Still other ex-FSU Israelis might consider other destinations, such as Germany or the United States. I encountered a few Odessans whose migration trajectories had included a number of locations.

Returnees: A general picture?

To summarize so far, returnees approach organized Jewish life in the city from different points of view. Some, such as Nadya, look to Jewish organizations for employment, and others, like Kostya and Marat, had become active participants in Jewish life. Others, as Nastya's and Nina's cases exemplify (even though of different generations), chose to remain on the periphery.

For those returnees active in the Jewish life of the city, experiences differed. Neither Dima nor his wife put any importance on their own or their family's religious observance but their children attended one of the city's Jewish Orthodox schools. Dima explained this decision as based on the fact that he and his family simply did not speak Ukrainian, now the language of instruction in most public schools in the city. At

the Jewish school their children could learn in Russian and still practice their Hebrew. Even so, Dima saw little in common between the ways he and his wife opted to raise their children as Jewish and the other, more religious, approaches that he found in Odessa on his return. As he explained:

One of the teachers at Migdal complained to me that my children were not paying attention to her lectures on Jewish traditions. I explained to her that, for Israelis, this is natural. In Israel most of the Russians are not religious and we don't mix with them [religious Jews]. It is not a world I want them to be in.

(As it happens, the teacher involved, Maya, had cited this very incident when explaining to me why Israel would not be an ideal place for her to raise her son, due to the vast gap between secular and religious culture.)

This research demonstrates that the projects of return to Odessa were characterized by considerable complexity and ambivalence. On the one hand, returning from Israel to Odessa often signaled that it was Odessa that ultimately counted as home. On the other hand, some Ukrainian and other FSU returnees, Odessans and non-Odessans, moved in order to follow their families or enhance their chances of prosperity. In turn, the actual experiences of returnees displayed a mosaic of different orientations, attachments and associations constructed by returnees about their past and present locations.

For elder returnees, the decision to move back was typically a response to obstacles in Israel that were not encountered by younger or middle-aged immigrants. Equally, their return was usually envisioned as permanent and experienced as more rooted: it was felt as homecoming. Younger returnees still felt strong ties to Israel, where (even though born in Odessa or the FSU) many had been raised, educated and/or served in the army and thus felt acculturated to their Israeli way of life. For these returnees, Israel still remained a place that partially defined them, even in Odessa. The orientations of middle-aged returnees were also mixed and largely depended on their familial and professional needs. But in nearly all cases, returnees approached Odessa primarily geared toward "creating better, more satisfying future lives" and thus more

likely to be engaged in “feasible projects of homecoming” than were those “aiming at resurrecting a golden, but lost past” (Stefansson 2004:4).

Now back in Odessa, many of my informants expressed their sense of connection with their multiple places of belonging through different modes of “being Jewish.” Some, for example Kostya, saw religious observance of Jewish laws as a way of keeping a link between his Israeli past and his present, despite his entirely secular life in Israel. Others, similarly but in less extreme measures, simply opted to take part in Jewish holidays or educate their children in Jewish schools so as to maintain their Hebrew language and Israeli secular culture. For a few disoriented or disenchanted returnees it was difficult to tell how, if at all, they would locally bridge their multiple experiences.

Many of my informants came from mixed families, where attachments to Israel versus Odessa and Ukraine were contested. Of course, mixed families are extremely common not only in Odessa but the FSU more widely (see Chapters 3 and 4 for discussion of the various potential implications of belonging to a mixed family).

Conclusion

This chapter opened with a historical perspective on Jewish migration from the Russian Empire and later the Soviet Union. There were key changes of motive for Soviet Jews wanting to leave their home and their choices of destination. In approaching the question of emigration today, and comparing accounts from my informants with the ethnographic vignettes of earlier migrants, one finds a rather different set of social, political and economic circumstances among Odessa’s Jewry. Today, migration was approached as a process of movement in multiple directions, which included the option of returning home. The case of Elena and Konstantin, for example, exhibits some of the ways locals managed to secure their regular return, as well as extra income, by engaging in the property business, which acted as a bridge between their two homes. Furthermore, the growing presence of returnees and transmigrants indicates a quite different orientation from the Soviet period, since many freely returned to their countries of origin or remained on the move. The dynamics of

migration visible in contemporary Odessa, and the web of attachments contemporary Jewish Odessans exhibited toward tangible, imagined, unreachd and previously prohibited places – which come into focus as a result of migration – present a messy but realistic picture of post-Socialist reality.

This chapter also illustrates that attitudes of Odessa's Jewish population toward their real and mythical home or, to use the more common terms, "homeland" and "diaspora," were far from fixed. Contingent, negotiated and reflecting the socioeconomic and political circumstances of home and abroad, where one feels "at home" or "away from home" was subject to individuals' experiences. For instance, some emigrants initially approached Israel as a place of belonging and their "historical homeland" but, suffering hardships in their new life, began to experience Israel otherwise, and themselves as living in the diaspora. On the other hand, returnees coming back to a supposedly familiar place could also gradually come to see their city as more foreign, whether due to being treated as foreigners or through unmet dreams of the place once left behind.²²⁸ Moreover, in some instances the notion of home or homeland may be applied to more than one destination or, in the process of disorientation, may even cease to exist. This is particularly true for returnees who, having shared the experience of living as a Russian-speaking diaspora in Israel, on their return possibly viewed themselves, or were viewed by others, as "Israelis" and in effect part of an Israeli diaspora in Odessa. Thus my research indicates that "home" and "diaspora" were not ideologically driven constants. Rather, they should be conceptualized as variable physical locations that social actors inhabit and relate to through pragmatic everyday experiences and life circumstances, which in turn shape their imagined reality and senses of attachment.

²²⁸ Mandel, writing about Turkish migrants in Germany who return to Turkey on a permanent or impermanent basis, highlights how many "returnees suffer from disorientation," unable to "merge back into the Turkish mainstream" because they are judged by others, and by themselves, as "*Alamancilar* (i.e. German-like)" (1990:160–161). Referring to the same material in a later book, Mandel describes "a subtle reversal in the reference" of "homeland" and "host land" where, in the case of her informants, "homeland [Turkey] assumes the status of a foreign, vacation destination" whereas Germany is considered their natal land (2008:18).

Among the majority of Odessa's Jewish population, who were assimilated, secular and Soviet by upbringing, Israel was not regarded as the center of their Jewish belonging and could hardly be termed their home. At the same time, this chapter clearly demonstrates how, for many Jewish residents, Israel remained a place of familiarity, interest and concern, mainly due to the personal and professional networks that connected Odessa's Jewish (and to a smaller degree non-Jewish) population to their various "diaspora" communities abroad. In this regard, Israel can be thought of as one of the countries with which Odessans identified as a place of partial loyalty and belonging without fully acceding to its status as their "homeland."

For Jewish youth Israel also held diverse images of reality, related to differences in affiliation. Those affiliated with Jewish organizations envisioned Israel in more ideological terms than other members of their generation, who remained on the fringes of the city's Jewish activity. While many of the affiliated youth identified and maintained ties with Israel, their actions indicated that their love for the revered Jewish state had little significant weight in how they planned their future. Thus Israel might be imagined as a "mythical homeland" (Levy 2005) but not necessarily as home in real terms.

In the years following Soviet dissolution, Israel has certainly become more tangible in the daily life of Odessa's Jewish population through the ideological agendas of Jewish organizations, direct travel experiences and personal and professional networks formed as a result of ongoing migration. However, the centrality of Israel was challenged by the attachments that local Jews felt toward their life in Odessa and other locations where family and friends might reside. Moreover, stories and experiences of Odessans living the difficult realities of immigration also altered the image of Israel for both "stay back" and returning Odessans. Thus competing orientations of homeland and diaspora ran through discourse on Israel and shift the understanding of center (life in Israel) and periphery (life outside Israel) embedded in classical accounts of Jews in Diaspora Studies (Safran 1991; Cohen 1997).

In the circumstances I have described, “homeland” and “diaspora” were not absolute givens for the diverse Jewry of Odessa (who, for the most part, exhibited strong ties to Odessa as a place), a relationship made all the more complicated by the growing presence of returnees who directly challenged the supposedly fundamental connection between Jews (as the classic diaspora) and Israel (their ancient homeland) by choosing to leave Israel and come back to Odessa (the supposed place of diaspora) both as an old place of familiarity and roots and as a new center of professional activity and personal growth. Perhaps for second-generation Odessan Israelis, Odessa will also take on the shape of a “symbolic homeland,” as Levy describes Morocco for the Moroccan Jews in Israel who visit their places of origin (2005:68–96) or a “vacation land” as second-generation Turkish returnees from Germany come to see Turkey (1990:162).

Similar experiences, identities and conceptions of home are starting to be reflected in the more recent literature on Jewish diaspora (Golbert 2001:380; Boyarin and Boyarin 1993; Levy and Weingrod 2005; Aviv and Shneer 2005) in seeking to account for the diverse outlooks of Jews, as shaped by their relationship to Israel and attachments to their native lands. The examples of Odessan “stay back” Jews and returnees discussed in this chapter challenge the generalized diasporic traits by which Jews living outside Israel are classically represented and open new avenues for analyzing Jewish orientations and identities as embedded in culturally specific histories and locales.

Chapter 7

Odessa: A Jewish City?

Year 2000. Two Odessans are walking down the street and one says to the other:

- Look, here comes a woman, I think she might be Jewish.
- No, it can't be, all the Jews already left in the '90s.
- I will still ask. Madam, Madam, I am sorry to ask but are you Jewish?
- No, I am not Jewish – I am just an idiot.

A popular anecdote of the 1990s

- How many people live in Odessa? – One million.
- How many Jews live in Odessa? – You already have your answer.

An anecdote (cited in Richardson 2004:3)

Introduction

Before I began my fieldwork in Odessa I shared the idea of my project with some of my Russian family members and friends. They all agreed that Odessa, a city they described as being “Jewish,” would be an “exceptional” and “one of a kind” place to carry out my research – but then many of them added, “But how many Jews are left in Odessa?” A similar duality about Odessa’s Jewish character is apparent in the difference between the two anecdotes above. The second evokes the feeling of a completely Jewish Odessa, while the first implies the mass Jewish emigration that the city experienced in the early 1990s when, the anecdote suggests, only an idiot would have stayed. Both these humorous views are exaggerations, of course, but they are notable as public discourse about Odessa.

The image or stereotype of Odessa being a “Jewish city” is still very much alive in the rhetoric of Odessa’s natives, émigrés and visitors alike. It is a picture supported by recent historical accounts and also by some contemporary literary works. Odessa as a “Jewish city” is one of the essential elements of the larger city myth that surrounds and shapes the public perception and imagination of Odessa (both at home and

abroad) through literature, music, anecdotes, mass media, tourism and local dialogue.²²⁹ It is, however, a stereotype that has also been interrogated by locals, visitors and Odessa's émigrés through the same media of communication that once guaranteed its very existence (Tanny 2007:13–14; Sylvester 2005:194).

This chapter engages with divergent ideas about the image of Odessa as a “Jewish city,” as these are supported, challenged or deconstructed through literary sources, local claims and my own observations in the field.²³⁰ My aim here is to draw out a deeper understanding of the intertwined discourses of myth, history and individual realities that support Odessa's trope of Jewishness and, at the same time, leave it open to scrutiny.

I start this chapter with a short summary of local Jewish history and the “Odessa Myth” as these have informed the discourse of Odessa and its “distinctiveness” (Ramer 2008) within the larger area of the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union and present-day Ukraine – a distinctiveness accredited, at least partially, to the influence of the city's Jews. I then turn to individuals' interpretations and experiences of Odessa's “Jewish” image as it grounds the rhetoric of Jewishness in the living practices and conversations of ordinary residents of the city. I examine the ways in which these internalized views and actions differ from each other and also collectively differ from more official lines of representation, for example, in tourism. In the concluding part of the chapter, I situate my analysis of Odessa's trope of Jewishness in close proximity to the work of Herzfeld (2005) where he argues that stereotypes play an important role in both reproducing and contesting power relations on the local level. Using Herzfeld's

²²⁹ Interesting comparisons can be made between images of Odessa and New York City. In their ethnography of New York City, Glazer and Moynihan note how the tone of New York as a “Jewish” city is openly communicated to visitors. The euphemistic use of the term “New Yorker” to refer to “Jew,” they write, is not uncommon in the United States ([1970[1963]:138, 144). Yet, unlike New York City, where Jews still make up nearly one-third of the urban population, in Odessa this is only historically true.

²³⁰ I engage with the subject of the city not only as a physical structure but also as a constellation of personalities, attitudes and ideas (Wirth 1938:19) about the social and cultural space that its residents inhabit and the perceptions they share or dispute concerning its character.

paradigm, I ask the question *for whom* the idea of Jewish Odessa matters, how individuals employ it, and why.²³¹

In this chapter, I suggest that most local Jews recognize the historical dimensions of the Jewish characteristics of their city even if they stand divided on what those are today, or fail to recognize them in the present-day Jewish revival. While Odessans display varied takes on Odessa's Jewish stereotype, such rhetoric, I want to argue, is nonetheless present and serves as a powerful tool used both to secure the memory of Odessa as distinct place and also to resist contemporary forces of cultural homogenization.

History and Myth-Making in Odessa

The idea of Odessa being a Jewish city is long standing. Here I shall concentrate primarily on the so-called "Odessa Myth," dialogue about which, I would like to suggest, shapes and is simultaneously shaped by the perceptions that Odessans and others have of the city. Historically, Odessa was a famously Jewish city because of its impressively large and relatively empowered Jewish population in the 19th and early 20th century. Large numbers of Jews were active participants in the social, economic, political and educational developments of young Odessa and took part in the cultural and intellectual life of the city (see Chapters 1 and 2).

It would be hard to perceive the city today as a Jewish place, given the decrease in the Jewish population and the rising numbers of ethnic Ukrainians, followed by ethnic Russians and the influx of other ethnic groups (Turks, Chinese, Koreans, Tatars) – and hence the growing presence of other religions (Christianity, Islam etc.). Undoubtedly, the city's Christian and Muslim populations represent a much higher percentage of the

²³¹ In this chapter, I often use the term "Jewish stereotype" as a shorthand way of referring to the idea of Odessa as a Jewish city. There have been many ways of giving content to Odessa's Jewishness. However, what I am emphasizing is the sheer assertion of Odessa's Jewishness and the role this plays in asserting Odessa as a distinctive, special and "other" place. This in turn is highly bound up with the "Myth of Odessa."

religiously observant than do the members of the Jewish faith.²³² Nor can we overlook the overarching pressure of Ukrainization that, by means of political, social and economic pressure, is working to make Odessa first and foremost a Ukrainian city (Herlihy 2008; Bilaniuk 2005) and which is felt most deeply at the level of language politics and education.²³³

Nevertheless, history and demographics aside, Odessan natives and many visitors knowledgeable about the city have another point of reference that contributes to their image and experience of Odessa as well as their sense of self within its borders. This world, although mythical, is, in my view, not any less real as an influential force of imagination. Some scholars go as far as claiming that, through its development, “the myth of old Odessa *became* the city’s history and Odessa’s myth-makers became its leading historians” (Tanny 2008:403, emphasis in original).²³⁴

Richardson describes the “Odessa Myth” as “a constellation of images and ideas about Odessa” (2004:14) originating in 19th-century Russian literature in the works of Alexander Pushkin (*Evgenii Onegin*) and subsequent writers who “portray the city as a special place dominated by trade that seemingly sprang up from nowhere in the steppe, populated by people from different countries” (Naidorf 2001:330 quoted in Richardson 2004:14).²³⁵ To Pushkin and others, “most notably Kuprin, Balmont, and

²³² The city’s religious landscape is today dominated by the Ukrainian Orthodox Church–Moscow Patriarch which has more than 50 communities and 30 churches (Richardson 2006:219). Other Christian denominations include: UOC–Kiev Patriarch, Russian Orthodox Church, Armenian Apostolic Church, Greek Catholic, Roman Catholic, Protestant and other communities. According to statistics provided by one of the leaders of the Muslim population, Imam Sheikh Usam, “there are some 40,000 Muslims in Odessa.” This number includes “Ukrainian citizens, permanent residents, students and businessmen” (cited in Richardson 2006:220).

²³³ Herlihy notes that 80 percent of the schools in Ukraine have changed the language of instruction from Russian to Ukrainian (2008:20). This trend is also visible in university settings where Ukrainian has been declared the official language of instruction and examination.

²³⁴ Tanny argues that the myth of Odessa “had achieved hegemony and a near monopoly over the way the memory of old Odessa is publicly articulated, much as Marxism–Leninism previously governed the writing of history under Communism” (2008:404).

²³⁵ Tanny emphasizes that the myth of Odessa “had been developing since the city’s founding in 1794” (2007:2). Moreover, he notes that the “passing of its golden age” was already “noted and mourned as

Bunin," as literary scholar Rebecca Stanton points out, "Odessa represented a place whose very identity was bound up in 'otherness,' a place defined by its nonnormative and nonmetropolitan status" (2003:120). In the early and mid-20th century, this image of the city was elaborated and infused with new themes of criminality, Jewish humor and the underside of city life, portrayed most vividly in the works of Isaac Babel, Valentin Kataev, Ilya Ilf and Evgenii Petrov, Yury Olesha and others.²³⁶ These renowned Russian/Soviet writers, together with "local historians, film makers, poets, novelists, journalists, memoirists" and comedians, "extolled Odessa as a cosmopolitan, energetic oasis of freedom and beauty and elaborated on the Odessa myth" (Gubar and Herlihy 2009:139).

While a great many writers inscribed Odessan life in the pages of their works, the world created by Isaac Babel, especially in *Odessa Tales*, is perhaps the most widely cited as the point of reference of "Old Odessa" or "*Ta Odessa*" (That Odessa) and credited with "popularizing the image of Odessa as a city of swashbuckling Jewish swindlers" (Tanny 2008:2). Babel's writings at the beginning of the 20th century were not only important in putting Jewish characters center stage but were also revolutionary in shifting the depictions of Jews common in Russian literature at the time (e.g. Anton Chekhov, Maxim Gorky), which often portrayed Jews as "small, bent, weak and pathetic" individuals (Safran 2002:256) living in fear of the next pogrom (Stanton 2003:122; Tanny 2008:2). Babel's popularity and personal achievements as a writer were no less important in strengthening the status of the "imagined community" (Anderson 1983) of the Russian Jewish intelligentsia. In describing Odessa, Babel used his literary talent to create a different image of city life where Jews

early as the mid-nineteenth century ... since then, successive generations of myth-makers have posited their own endings for old Odessa" (2007:2).

²³⁶ Tanny notes that, unlike other cities (New Orleans or Shanghai) that have been similarly transformed into a "fabled city of thieves," Odessa "has been imagined as a *judeokleptocracy*, a city overrun and controlled by Jewish gangsters and swindlers" (2008:1). In the same passage, describing the city's "wit and irony," he also claims that Odessa's "brand of humor" was "brought to the city from the *shtetls* of Eastern Europe" where it found a "new home" and "became the dominant mode for articulating the Odessa myth."

“embodied the physical strength, revelry and wit for which Odessa was famous” (Tanny 2008:2). Through his work, Odessa became a recognizable symbol of a place where everyone, including the Jews – and in great part due to the Jews – “can live free and easy.” He describes Odessa as:

the most charming city in the Russian Empire. If you think about it, it is a town in which you can live free and easy. Half of the population is made up of Jews, and Jews are a people who have learned a few simple truths along the way ... To a large extent it is because of them that Odessa has this light and easy atmosphere. (2002:71)

Babel’s *Odessa Tales* by no means portray Odessa as a city inhabited only by Jews; on the contrary, he builds on what Stanton dubs the pre-existing “Odessa text,” the standard repertoire for characterizing of Odessa, composed of “the sun, the sea, the dust; the ‘live varieties’ of languages and nationalities, composed of sailors, traders, holidaymakers, Italian singers, Jewish fiddlers, and Russian poets, with a steamy admixture of smugglers, gangsters, and exiled Russian malcontents” (2003:123). Yet Babel also introduces new Odessan spaces such as Moldovanka (an area in the city where many new and illegal immigrants settled, Jews among them) and new Jewish “types,” for example, Benya Krik and his gang of “tough but honorable criminals” (Ozick 2002:12). In Babel’s *Odessa Tales* Jewish people, affairs, practices, food, humor and language are all interwoven into the fabric of Odessa and come to stand for the city as a whole. On a similar note, Tanny argues that “with a few notable exceptions, most of Odessa’s myth-makers and the legendary gangsters and musicians they have celebrated have either been Jewish or have been significantly influenced by Jewish culture” (2007:14). In more recent times, the satirical work of Mikhail Jvanetsky (also the founder and director of the International World Odessit Club), along with his and other memoirs of Odessa’s locals and émigrés,²³⁷ films (notably *The Carter and the King* and *The Art of Living in Odessa*) and the TV series *Likvidatsya* (Liquidation) (which portrays the Odessa of the 1950s with all of its Yiddishisms and humor), maintains the

²³⁷ See, for example, Levitin’s article, “Ya Odessit” (I am an Odessit) in which he equates many of Odessa’s distinctive characteristics with characteristics of Jews (2005:30–35).

image of Odessa as a distinct reality and the Jewishness it once and, arguably, still preserves. Virtual communication, blogs, chat websites and online periodicals about the city are used by Odessans around the world and so contribute to the life of Odessa's stereotypes and their virtual and transnational force.²³⁸

This legendary myth of the city has also recently been picked up by the tourist industry, which has turned Odessa's Jewishness into a marketable trait, a way of "branding" Odessa. In the city's street markets and souvenir shops, the *matryoshkas* (wooden dolls) typical of a Hasidic household and miniature iron sculptures of Jewish jewelers and scholars are offered next to Cossack-style belts, Russian decorative boxes and joke identity cards and passports with "*Odessit*" under the heading of nationality. As well as the official Odessa city guides, the city has recently released a *City Guide of Jewish Odessa* (published in Russian and English) and Jewish tours of the city are available, advertised publicly online and privately through recommendations. The city has also commemorated many Jewish historical and fictional characters with statues that proudly grace Odessa's downtown area.²³⁹

Books of "Odessan language" – the city's legendary dialect in which Odessans' use of Russian is heavily influenced by Yiddish – and collections of "Odessan anecdotes" – many of which feature Rabinovich, an Odessan Jewish character in Soviet-era jokes – are some of the more recent contributions for the tourist market. Publishers of such materials are very happy to exploit the fact that "Odessan dialect" is one of the most deeply rooted myths of the city (Kotushenko 2007:5) and has been compared to a *vinegret* (Russian chopped salad) of languages (Doroshevich 1895 reprinted in Kotushenko 2007:7) because of its mixture of Russian, Ukrainian, Yiddish and other foreign words, intonations and case structures. For Rothstein, the Odessan language

²³⁸ See for example: <http://www.odesit.com>; <http://www.odessaglobe.com>; <http://www.ta-odessa.com>; <http://www.migdal.ru/forum>; <http://www.odessapage.com>.

²³⁹ In the courtyard of the Literature Museum you can find two statues dedicated to Odessa's humor, personified in images of Sashka the Fiddler and Rabinovich. Further up, on Odessa's main pedestrian thoroughfare, Deribasovskaya Street, you can find two more statues dedicated to Jewish Odessans – one of Leonid Utesov and the missing "Twelfth Chair" of Il'f and Petrov's novel.

and music offer a way of approaching the “symbiotic relationship between and among nationalities” (2001:781). In his article “How It Was Sung in Odessa,” he demonstrates the influence that Russian and Yiddish languages had on each other in the public life of the city. He argues that, in the context of music and conversation, the two languages were often intermixed or used interchangeably to reflect on what he calls “life on the sidewalks of Odessa” (2001:782),²⁴⁰ where Jews interacted with Russians, Ukrainians, Poles, Greeks and others. Literary critics in the early 20th century looked down on Odessan slang as a “barbarization of the Russian language” and one of Odessa’s newspapers published around 1912 “consistently referred to the city as *Iudessa* [Judaedodessa]” (Savchenko 1996:146 cited in Rothstein 2001:784).

It is important to note the historical character of Rothstein’s studies, as his article title suggests (“How It Was Sung in Odessa,” my emphasis) and he explicitly states (quoting the title of a book published in Russia in 1997 by Anatolii F. Kozak), “*Odessa zdes’ bol’she ne zhiviot*” (Odessa doesn’t live here anymore) (2001:782). Today the *vinegret* of Odessan Russian is far less colorful and mixed than it was in Odessa’s past.

Rothstein attributes these changes partly to processes of migration and globalization, both of which have affected the city’s patterns of life: hence songs such as “*Brighton – nash odesskiy filial*” (Brighton Beach is our Odessa branch office) (2001:782).

Nonetheless, it would be wrong to assume that Odessa has lost all the Yiddishisms in its Odessan tongue. Words such as *gesheft* (business), *maisa* (story), *shmuck* (a fool), *sha* (quite!) and *mishpuha* (family/company) were commonly used by a great many of my informants, who also occasionally recycled phrases such as *chtob ya tak zhil* (translation of Yiddish *zhil ikh azoy lebn*, an expression used in Odessa Russian, as in Yiddish, to emphasize the truthfulness of what one has just said).

²⁴⁰ Rothstein acknowledges that other languages such as Ukrainian, Polish and Greek also penetrated the Russian language used by Odessans but views these languages as less influential than Yiddish (2001:783). He also notes that, just as Odessa Russian is *sui generis*, so too is Odessa Yiddish. In fact, as he states, the *Great Dictionary of the Yiddish Language* has an entry for *odeser yidish*, which it describes as “full of Russian words” (1961:45 cited in Rothstein 2001:786).

In 2006 Migdal hosted a week-long Jewish festival that included theatre productions of Jewish plays, an exhibition of Jewish art, city tours of Jewish Odessa, Jewish dance classes and so on. In 2009 Odessa also celebrated a festival of klezmer music that, according to its organizers, was very successful in bringing Jewish and non-Jewish Odessans closer to Jewish, Yiddish and Odessan culture. While present-day Odessa is hardly the *Iudessa* it was at the beginning of the 20th century, today, at the beginning of the 21st century, could it possibly be on its way to reclaiming its Jewish fame?

Personal Reflections on Odessa's Jewishness

Among those Odessans who believe their city to be "Jewish" is my friend Maya. Not only in her words but in her actions as a Jewish activist, Maya works to preserve and build Odessa's Jewish character. Justifying her stance, she began by summarizing Odessa's history, concentrating on the role Jews had played in the growth of the city, and then moved on to the present. "First, Odessa's Jewish *obshchina* [community] is by far the most active and involved in the life of the city if you take into account other ethnic communities, including the Ukrainians," Maya claimed. When I suggested that Odessa had many more Christians and Muslims than Jews, she quickly corrected my implicitly religious definition of Jewish "community." The Jewish national (ethnic) group was, she explained, an all-inclusive social structure in which religious Jews (like herself) were but a small portion of the Jewish population.

For her, Jews' "activeness" could be measured by the cultural programs they organized (festivals, classes, conferences, concerts, exhibitions, publications etc.), which mainly but not exclusively thematized various strands of Jewish life in Odessa. Then there was the status that local Jews occupied in Odessa's political and economic structures: "Many of the city deputies in Odessa are Jews," she pointed out, "and the mayor of our city is Jewish. This could not happen in many other cities of the ex-Soviet

world.”²⁴¹ Furthermore, Maya told me, Jews owned many local businesses and thus helped to support the local economy. The fact that Jewish Odessans now lived in many countries as a result of their mass migration yielded a network of ties through which they could and did conduct businesses on an international level. While Maya highlighted the important role Jews played as politicians and entrepreneurs, she also recognized their strength in becoming more aware of what it meant to be Jewish. She referred to this process as “strengthening your *evreykosti* (Jewish bones).” She concluded, “There might be fewer Jews in the city today but they are becoming better quality Jews.”

At the same time, Maya judged Odessa’s Jewishness by the level of absorption and acceptance of Jews and their activities in the larger realm of city culture.



25 Odessans dance to klezmer music at the Odessa Port, Festival of Jewish Diaspora, Summer 2006

²⁴¹ On a number of occasions Jewish Odessans expressed a lack of support for the involvement of Jews in local politics, seeing this as contributing to the rise of anti-Semitism. “Jews should stay away from power,” one Odessan stated, “no matter how much good Gurvitz [Odessa’s current mayor] does for the city, he will always be viewed from the side of the ‘fifth line of his passport,’ giving reason for anti-Semitic manipulation from the side of various structures and political parties” (<http://www.migdal.ru/forum/18408> (last accessed on 06. 25.2009). Also see Chapter 2 where I outline concerns of elderly Jews who viewed the rising anti-Semitism as a function of Jewish visibility, which in theory supports the claim made by Louis Wirth: “when he [a Jew] is no longer seen, anti-Semitism declines” (1928:289).

The fact that non-Jewish Odessans were extremely tolerant of Jewish festivals and celebrations in their city, at times even participating in them, and the fact that some non-Jews send their children to Jewish cultural centers as part of their upbringing, in Maya's view also demonstrated Odessa's status as a "Jewish" city.²⁴² On a less official level of sociality, I myself noticed that many Odessans of non-Jewish descent knew a great deal of Yiddish terminology, were knowledgeable about some major Jewish holidays and, especially, Jewish cuisine. On a number of occasions I also met non-Jews who were interested and actively participating in various Jewish organizations where some even played leadership roles.²⁴³ Possibly all this is because the locals believe, as a Ukrainian taxi driver once told me, that "in Odessa, everyone is a little bit Jewish and a little bit of everything else."

Far from everyone would fully agree with Maya. Elena, an elderly woman in her seventies who now lives in Israel, presented a different take on the question of Odessa's Jewishness. As she explained in one of her letters to me:

Some 20–30 years ago, one could have still called Odessa a Jewish city. Not so much because of the number of Jews who lived here but more so because of the influence their presence had on all Odessans of all different nationalities, which you could sense. Undoubtedly there was an influence of Yiddish and to a small degree Hebrew on the "Odessian language," by which Odessans were recognized by others and recognized one another in any corner of the Soviet Union. One cannot overlook Jewish humor, *hohma* [Yiddish for a wise story] and, of course, Jewish cuisine, which Odessans adopted to the fullest as part of their local kitchen.

Recalling Odessa in the late 1960s, Elena described how Jewishness was previously visible in the city. "I remember seeing elderly and not so elderly women easily conversing in Russian and Yiddish on the street in a very natural fashion." Fully

²⁴² Maya was referring to non-Orthodox Jewish organizations, which accept children of mixed families and have some non-Jewish participants, as well as the tolerant program that Mazl Tov, the Early Child Development Program, organized for non-Jewish children.

²⁴³ See "Eager Ukrainian tests Hillel's limits: He may be Christian, but he's addicted to Jewish life" <http://www.jewishaz.com/issue/printstory.mv?051202+ukrainian> (last accessed 06.21. 2006); see also Shayduk (2007).

acknowledging that Odessa was an international city, she nonetheless insisted that its “Jewishness” was more pervasive than any other ethnic orientation. But, once the borders opened after the breakup of the USSR, Elena explained, Odessa lost much of its Jewish *kolorit* (coloring, tonality) as many Jewish Odessans left.²⁴⁴ In place of these Jews, different Jews had appeared in recent years:

Religious Jews, Israelis, people foreign to Odessa, incomprehensible to Odessa, who do not know, and I think do not love, Odessa. They have their own goals and missions, which have nothing in common with the Soviet, jolly, easy going and *besshabashnoi* [reckless/crazy] Jewish Odessa.

Elena did not blame the loss of Odessa’s Jewish world solely on the outflow of the Jews from the city. Rather, like others I met, she pointed to the influx of *priezzhie* (newcomers, especially from rural villages and small towns) who are often blamed for Odessa’s decline. Mila, a woman in her fifties expressed a similar view. “When I came back to Odessa after the War with my parents, all but two families in my courtyard were Jewish. Today, all but two are non-Jews. They are all *priezzhie* who don’t care about our city.”

According to Elena, Odessa’s great reputation still lives on but those who created it are “long gone.” “They live in Russia, the USA, Israel, even in Australia but, unfortunately not any longer in Odessa.” She spoke of the nostalgia for this “lost world” felt by many of its inhabitants and Odessans abroad, Jews and non-Jews alike. Giving examples, Elena told how, when Odessans reunited with their compatriots, they love to sing songs about the city (many of which are written by Jews, speak of Jewish literary characters or include a hint of Yiddish). Many individuals, she insisted, continue to read and write memoirs detailing the city as it was at various times in the past. Elena

²⁴⁴ Kartsev, one of the *Odessits* whom Tanny quotes in his 2007 paper, expressed a similar view to Elena. “[F]ew 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” (Kartsev 2001:175 quoted in Tanny 2007:14). Also see Dreitser (2003) where he also argues that Odessa as a “living city” is no longer in Odessa but rather in “the southernmost protuberance of Brooklyn [Brighton Beach – otherwise known as Little Odessa]” (2003:93).

stressed that she was not only talking about Jewish Odessans and told me the following story to illustrate the point.

During a short trip to Odessa from Israel in 2008, Elena spent the last day of her stay helping out a friend who wanted to plant some herbs at the new *dacha* she had rented for the summer. But when they arrived, they quickly realized that the owners of the house were actually present, seated around a “dressed up table” in the midst of the May Day celebration. Not wanting to be rude, Elena and her friend joined the company but told them that they could not stay long (due to Elena’s departure). When their hosts asked where it was that Elena was headed, and received her answer “to Israel,” the whole atmosphere suddenly changed. “They started clapping and shouting ‘*molodez, molodez*’ [which loosely translates as “bravo!”] and then jumped up to kiss and hug me.” Somewhat surprised at this reaction by her new friends, Elena told me that their congratulations to her quickly turned into a shower of kind words about Odessan Jews in general and about Israel. Reflecting on this incident, she told me that she herself had never realized how much Odessans, real Odessans, missed the city’s Jews, and added, “I think this was how they expressed their nostalgia. They longed for that Odessa they had lost. Lost because of the mass migration of the Jewish population who, at one point in history, made Odessa – the city it was – loved by Jews and non-Jews alike.”²⁴⁵ Odessa’s Jewishness stood for all that was historically special about the city.

²⁴⁵ Richardson also notes that the city’s residents “are aware of the mass emigration of the Jews and many comment on their departure with regret” (2004:20–21). “Indeed, during a Humorina (Comedy) Festival in the late nineties,” she describes how “a friend saw a sign that read: ‘Jews, Come back to Odessa! We miss you – it’s boring without you. If you can’t come back, take us with you!’” (2004:21). A similar but more elaborate point is made in the novel of an *Odessit* currently living in Israel, David Shehter, *Est’ Gorod kotory viju vo sne* (There is a city I see in my dreams). He writes, “We Odessan Jews took with us not OUR Odessa, we took away ODESSA [capital letters in the original]. We took away all which made her a magical city so dear to millions of citizens of the USSR who loved not only her beautiful streets but her aura of freedom, blazing love of life, sparks of humor, something so special which made Odessa not characteristic of a small Ukrainian city ... Today, when the Jews have left Odessa, her streets are the same, I hear even better, but Odessa became a very provincial city which it would not have been if it was not for those citizens who spoke Russian but thought in Yiddish or in

Not all Jewish Odessans I met saw today's Odessa through the prism of nostalgia for the past, especially not members of the younger generation. Gosha, for example, told me that Odessa could not be considered a Jewish city any more:

Too few Jewish people are left in Odessa ... There is still something in the air, but ... For instance, when I started studying at school in 1988 five of my classmates were Jewish, when I graduated I was the only one. When I was studying in Odessa Poly-Technical Institute, I was the only Jew – not just in my group but in my whole faculty.

According to him, there was something in the culture of the city that remained Jewish but most of it was a matter of the past. Odessa was unfortunately and undoubtedly becoming more and more Ukrainian. "The problem," Gosha explained rather cynically, "is that most Ukrainian politicians like to destroy old culture but they don't like to build anything new." While Gosha seemed quite regretful about these changes, he saw no point in mourning the past and concentrated on his plans for the future. He did not think that Odessa had it in her ever to become a Jewish city again, despite the efforts of affiliated Jews.

In debating the character of her native city, Diana emphasized the difference between so-called public opinion and the everyday living practices of Jews and others. There was a myth of Odessa's Jewishness and there was the reality. Yes, Odessa could be viewed as "Jewish" but what was the point of such labeling in the first place? Diana explained that:

for me, the city is anational. Despite the fact that the city has a large number of Ukrainians, they are all first and foremost Odessans. They don't open Ukrainian cuisine restaurants, they don't speak Ukrainian, they don't wear embroidered clothing, they don't vote for Yuschenko, and they don't fight with NATO or Russia – all that is Ukrainian in them is the inscription in their passport and *basta*. The same goes for local Russians, Germans and others. They each might have their own religion but the mentality of the people is neutral.

Odessans today were aware of the fact that their city's Jewish presence, influence and identification remained a matter of interest. As well as the conversations I witnessed firsthand, questions about the present position of Odessa's Jews were also publicly addressed. The Director of the Museum of History of Odessa Jews, Michael Rashkovetsky, approached this subject in the exhibition "Jews of Odessa: Is It Only The Past?," organized with the financial backing of the Rothschild Foundation in April 2007. Writing about the exhibition, Rashkovetsky argued:

Many renowned researchers insist that a Ukrainian Jew is but a dried up branch on the tree of world Jewry. But maybe Odessa can be viewed as an exception? It has, after all, always been exceptional. That is how she [Odessa] was thought of in the Russian Empire, that is how she remained in the Soviet Union, and that is how she is thought of in all her imperative moments. (Rashkovetsky 2007:3)

Rashkovetsky, to be fair, did present the exhibition as an "experiment" (hence the question mark: "Is it only the past?") and he also notes the organizers' interest in portraying "Odessa [as] an extraordinary place and its Jews are not only mourning their legendary past but also awaiting their bright future" (2007:3). He is also well informed about the statistics, stating that "never in the history of its existence did Odessa have such a small Jewish representation, except during the period between Spring of 1942 and Spring of 1944, when the city was 'Judenfrei' [free of Jews, 'Jew free']" (2007:4-5). Ending on a note of optimism, Rashkovetsky tried to convince visitors to the exhibition to see Odessa's Jewish life as not only in the past: "It is not [just] because of the collected materials about 'Jewish revival' that I make my claim about Odessa's bright future ... [T]he main point of optimism is some of the visitors to the exhibition – a group of parents and students from the Migdal center whose productivity was already visible by a few newborn babies among the group" (2007:5).

Extracts from the guest book of the Museum of History of Odessa Jews, which appear in the same volume of the *Migdal Times* as Rashkovetsky's text on the exhibition, fostered the "imagined community" (Anderson 1983) of Odessa's Jews. Inscribed in many languages, they offered an image of affinity that is both local and everywhere, a web of attachments (entries from Odessa, Lviv, Kiev, Donetsk, Moscow, Minsk, New

York, Baltimore, San Francisco, Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, London, Amsterdam, Sydney etc.) that binds together those Odessans who trace their belonging through distant roots back to the city and those who still inhabit its quarters). As audience, their attention and praise of the exhibition underwrote the pronouncement by one visitor that “Jews were, are and always will be in Odessa” (*Migdal Times* 2007 June–July, 30). Moreover, the international attention expressed in the article also demonstrated to locals and others that the subject of Odessa’s Jewishness was of importance and interests to many citizens of the world.²⁴⁶

The phenomenon of Odessa’s Jewish popular labeling has also been commented on by scholars and historians. In his recent review of the 2005 film *Odessa, Odessa*, directed by an Israeli film maker, Michael Boganim – of which more in the following section – Tanny notes the film’s grim picture of a contemporary Odessa from which significant numbers of “Jews have gone ... taking the city’s character with them.” Yet Odessa is a place “where Jewish integration was reciprocal: while the Jews became more Russian over the years, Odessa’s Gentiles became more Jewish.” Thus, in his view, Jewish contributions to Odessa’s cultural landscape have not been forgotten. Rather, they are being actively commemorated today in the city’s streets, parks and museums. Thus “most of Odessa’s Jews may be gone, but Odessa remains a Jewish city” (Tanny 2006:24). In similar vein, Richardson notes that, although Odessa’s Jewry has dwindled in numbers, “Odessa is often still considered a Jewish city” (2004:20).

For some, we can conclude, the aura of Jewishness alive and experienced in the city is everlasting; many Odessans share this view. For them, it appears, in all periods of Odessa’s existing history (some would argue even prior to its official history)²⁴⁷ the city was Jewish – differently Jewish – but nonetheless Jewish. In such ideology, today’s

²⁴⁶ For a summary of the history and permanent collections of the Museum of Odessa Jews see <http://english.migdal.ru/museum>.

²⁴⁷ Karakina (2006:13) notes that Jewish tombstones found by archaeologists in Odessa confirm that Jews lived in the area long before the city was founded.

Jewish revival signals the creation of Odessa's new post-Soviet chapter but the continuation of an old narrative of being a Jewish place.

To others, the city's Jewish identity is on a downward trajectory, its essence ever depleting over time. Among this group are those who believe in the importance of Odessa's Jewishness but feel that it can never be re-created and thus remains alive only in the form of memory or "a legend in the making" (Dreitser 2003:92–93). For them, the efforts of "active" Jews in their city and the current Jewish visibility cannot be recognized as a continuation or revival of something distinctively "Odessan;" this is something new. Many, like Elena above, drew a clear line between those Jews who now lived in Odessa and "real" Odessan Jews.

Another persistent ideology in Jewish Odessan circles can be called a stance of neutrality. As such, Odessans are Odessans – period. No single ethnic group or religion can capture the diverse milieu of people, processes and interests alive in its "urbanity" (Ruble 2008:39). In this line of thinking, the Jewish traits of the city are not brushed aside nor regarded as unimportant; rather, they are taken into account but not singled out hierarchically from other ethnic threads that make Odessans, in possibly the same way as New Yorkers or residents of New Orleans, a people of their city on equal terms.²⁴⁸

Conclusion: Power and the "Jewish Stereotype"

I initially watched the film *Odessa, Odessa* at the house of friends who had invited me over along with a few others. The viewing was short. We barely made it through the first 30 minutes of the film before our host, Anna, an employee of the Literature Museum, stood up and shut off the DVD. Already many of those present had expressed a strong sense of distaste at the way the film portrayed Odessa and its Jews. Images of deserted streets alternated with interviews of elderly Yiddish-speaking Jews,

²⁴⁸ See Glazer and Moynihan (1970[1963]) and Ramer (2008) for comparisons.

shot in their run down Soviet-style apartments. Odessa was depicted as a gloomy and dying place most of whose Jewish population had left. The director's selection of Yiddish-speaking Jews, in Anna's view, was based on an outdated and "too Jewish" misperception of the city: Odessan Jews would typically speak to one another in Russian (possibly with a few Yiddish words) but surely not in Yiddish, as the film insisted. Nor was she the only one that evening to point out all that the film had left out: how could this collection of six elderly and lonely Jews, and the single plangent theme of Jewish departure from this coast of the Black Sea, begin to capture the essence of local Jewish life in Odessa?

Interestingly enough, for this group of viewers the film made out their city both as too Jewish and not Jewish enough. Whilst it was clear to me that precisely these exaggerations regularly surfaced in everyday Odessan conversations and local humor, when projected on screen by an Israeli director they evidently aroused a very different set of reactions. The intimacy of stereotyping local Jewish culture had been invaded by an outsider's view. It became apparent to me that Jewish Odessans were not prepared to accept any one interpretation of their city or endorse a stereotype offered without their approval, even though, hypocritical as it may seem, they themselves did not agree on any one clear view either.

Anna and her husband, Mark, also detested the portrayal of Odessans in the next part of the film. Both in the Brooklyn neighborhood of Brighton Beach and in the Israeli city of Ashdod, images of elderly Jews continued to dominate in scenarios of low-wage employment and nostalgic gatherings on Soviet holidays, where long-time Odessan emigrants expressed their longing to return to Odessa. As if they felt it necessary to persuade me not to believe the film, my friends recited success stories of Jews who had made America or Israel their home and, equally, those who, much like them, had decided to stay without any regret. The emotional reaction provoked by the film had turned into an active verbal defense of their social territory (possibly exaggerated by my presence). The gist of their arguments was that they despised being seen as

victims, a dying breed whose destiny was limited to two bleak alternatives: death or emigration.

It was not only the director's misreading of Odessa's Jewishness that upset my friends but the fact that this was inscribed in the powerful form of a highly circulated and easily accessible media – a "locus of stereotype production" (Herzfeld 2005:208) out of their control. This vision of a Jewishless Odessa would potentially define not only how outsiders imagined their city as it existed today, in the present, but also therefore its past. I only grasped this later, thinking back to that evening and linking it to the sensitivity of Odessans in general about the ways that claims made about the contemporary city shaped its memory (Herlihy 2008:19–20).²⁴⁹ Similarly, many of my informants strongly objected to the way that present-day Ukrainization was imposing Ukrainian culture, a language and a history that was alien to them and, in effect, undoing Odessa's heritage, especially the city's long standing relation to Russia (going back to the foundation of the city by the Russian empress Catherine the Great) and the Russian language, which has historically dominated in the city (Herlihy 1986:248). Some Jews, as well as other residents of the city, expressed more neutral, and some even positive, views of Ukraine's nation-state building project.²⁵⁰ In most cases, Jewish and non-Jewish locals who expressed concern regarding Ukraine's current position did not object to the existence of Ukraine as a legal entity; rather, their issue lay with state politicians and Ukrainian nationalists who, in their opinion, are trying to encompass

²⁴⁹ Herlihy tells of the civil disturbances in 2007 that surrounded the unveiling of a new monument to the Russian empress Catherine the Great (the city's founder) as part of the city's official restoration of its historic past (the original statue had been removed by the Soviet authorities in the late 1920s). This was taken as an affront by Ukrainian nationalists, who protested against the erection of Russian glory on Ukrainian soil and invoked the heroism of the Cossack troops who had died resisting the imposition of Russian imperialism. Herlihy discusses how disruptive this violent rallying of Ukrainian nationalist forces was for local Odessans, with threatening reverberations going well beyond the particular incident of the monument.

²⁵⁰ The questionable status of Odessa's residents as "proper" Ukrainian citizens" (Skvirskaja 2010:80) is also reflected in commentary by Ukrainian residents in other cities, who view Odessa as anything but Ukrainian. As one grandmother, interviewed by Skvirskaja shared with the author, "Can you imagine, in L'vov they call Odessa a 'Yids city' (*zhidovskil gorod*)!" (2010:80). Similarly, one of my informants described being called a Moskovite in Kiev for responding in Russian when asked a question in Ukrainian by someone in the street.

Odessa as a historically Ukrainian territory by overlooking and downplaying the city's international connections and its links to the Russian state.²⁵¹ As Polese and Wylegala note, "[o]ne of the most contested areas in [Ukraine's current] state policy is the interpretation of the past" (Polese and Wylegala 2008:788).

In this chapter, I have explored paths of identity claiming, labeling and also stereotyping of post-Soviet Odessa. Specifically, I have concentrated on the Jewish dimension of Odessa's city culture by analyzing what local Jews make of the Jewishness that has silhouetted the city in local history, myth and public discourse. What I have sought to do here is to lay out the ways Odessa's Jews reflect on the nature of their locality in these times of contemporary change, continuities, contradictions and mismatches, as these surface in their accounts. At the same time, I hope that I have also succeeded in demonstrating how, despite the fragility of Jewish life in Odessa, mostly due to emigration, the myth of Odessa's Jewishness is nonetheless "alive and kicking." Commercialization of this myth is but one of the processes that have guaranteed the longevity of "Jewishness" in a city now thought to be "longing for its Jews."

Herzfeld has argued that stereotypes may function both to struggle against and sustain configurations of power, "contesting and reproducing power relations on the local level" (Herzfeld 2005:205). At the mercy of the local, national and global forces that today shape the character of Odessa as a physical space, a cultural index and a field of social relations, values and imagination, Odessa's Jews also look to the myth of the

²⁵¹ Conversations often focused on the way that a number of Ukrainian state politicians kept invoking a barrier of fundamental difference between Russia and the Ukraine. In the words of Arcadiy, a middle-aged cab driver, "All this anti-Russian stuff is nonsense. I have relatives there [in Russia]. I am not going to turn my back on them because the politicians are having a quarrel. We are all the same people when it comes down to it. We all grew up on the same playground." Another heated topic was the expanding Ukrainian language requirements and expectations in education, press and mass media. Some singled out the fact that Russian literature in school curricula was now to be read in Ukrainian translation, while others bemoaned the fact that old Soviet movies aired on TV were now dubbed in Ukrainian. "At least, if they openly recognized the legitimacy of both languages," Inga said to me, "[it would be all right but] today they just feed it down your throat." Many Odessans clearly objected to the "recasting" of Odessa's discourses that were happening before their eyes.

city's Jewishness as a way to resist the cultural homogenizing processes that many fear threatens Odessa's existence today, especially the processes of creating or imposing a national consciousness.

However, by the same token one might ask, isn't the labeling of Odessa as "Jewish" just as reductive and marginalizing (as Herzfeld characterizes all stereotyping) as the label "Ukrainian"? I want to suggest that the term "Jewish," as used by most of my informants, actually plays multiple roles. On the one hand, when Jewish Odessans called their city "Jewish," they obviously did not literally mean that only Jews lived there or that Jews dominated the place in any significant shape or form (see Karakina (2007:7). Rather, this self stereotype stands in for other idiomatic ways of expressing what distinguishes Odessa, such as "cosmopolitan," "tolerant" and "international" – which the historic and continuing presence of Jews (as an accepted ethnic and religious minority) guarantees and, to some degree, stands to define. Understood this way, as a metonym of the city's famous attributes, the stereotype of Odessa as a "Jewish" city does not abolish or overwrite its other characteristics (or inhabitants) in the way that many fear the term "Ukrainian" could do, imposing language, customs, education, religion and politics.

On the other hand, where "Odessa is a Jewish city" is taken as a claim to Jewish political and economic influence in the city, the stereotype can have other political functions. Interpreted as meaning Jewish dominance, it fuelled beliefs that Jews and not Ukrainians, the Russian language and not the Ukrainian language, controlled the local power nexus. Here, the city stereotype was taken to assert a non-Ukrainian element of authority that threatened to undermine the project of a Ukrainian nation state. Other modes of the stereotype were less political but not necessarily less powerful in their cultural meanings. They suggested that Jews could be at least partially credited with the city's dialect, cuisine, humor, music and literature and hence, taking these together, with its feeling of being "truly Odessan." The process of maintaining and feeding Odessa's stereotype of Jewishness was also a way that the city's Jewish émigrés connected to their city and those who have stayed. Thus,

Herzfeld's take on stereotypes as "a discursive weapon of power" (2005:202) helps us to see the range of meanings embodied in labeling Odessa a Jewish city.

The inconsistencies, contradictions and complexities found in the "insider" discourse of the city's Jews exemplify how (elaborating on Herzfeld) stereotyping can be simultaneously a strategy of dominance, a tactic of resistance, a claim to ownership or partial ownership of particular cultural traits and a way to maintain long-distance ties between home and its many peripheries. Engaging in what Herzfeld calls "cultural intimacy,"²⁵² Odessans may be seen as internally questioning the real existence and measure of their city's Jewish stereotype whilst externally supporting such rhetoric when they feel it necessary to protect and preserve the so to speak "special" status (Ramer 2008:4) of the city and themselves as its representatives. In this scenario, an attachment to a legacy of a place felt to be distinct can serve as a strategy for living one's life with distinction.

²⁵² Herzfeld's concept of "cultural intimacy" is only partially applicable here. While it brilliantly captures the ways in which stereotypes are frequently put to use in struggles over power, his emphasis on "those aspects of a cultural identity that are considered a source of *external embarrassment*" (2005:3, emphasis added) does not apply to Jewishness for Odessans today.

Conclusion

This ethnographic study has examined the complexities, ambiguities and conflicts circulating around the nature of Jewish identity and attachment among Odessa's contemporary Jewish population.

In the aftermath of Jewish mass emigration from the USSR and post-Soviet states, this thesis has focused on the destinies of those Jews who remained, those who have since returned and those who still contemplate or engage in movement between countries today. It offers a vivid and detailed account of the ways in which Jews in Odessa act out, reflect upon, question and yoke together their positions as Jews, as migrants, as Odessans, as Russians, as Ukrainians and in, some cases, as ex-Soviets through various measures of their cultural capital: religion, language, kinship, education, political loyalties and local and international networks.

I have incorporated accounts of individual and collective memory in Chapters 1 and 2, where the history of Odessa as a place, people and experience allows the reader to grasp some of the intricacies and mixed emotions in the aftermath of Soviet rule. These chapters presented a background to the contemporary developments that the rest of the thesis addressed and, in particular, offered an alternative perspective to the dominant images of repressed Jewish life under Soviet rule.

Together, the remaining chapters focused on projects of Jewish revival and migration and the repertoire of options offered to and by Jews from home and from abroad, invoking different registers of affiliation, loyalty and obligation. I have examined the multiple factors affecting processes of self and group formation and the settings in which they are negotiated, contested or confirmed. This study has stressed throughout the ambiguous and contingent nature of Jewish transitions and transformations as witnessed on individual, familial and communal levels.

Following the ethnographic methodology adopted here, I have included narrated life histories, informal conversations and interviews, as well as my own observations of the

city and local Jews of various backgrounds and ages. In these ways I have sought to capture the range of experiences encompassed by Jewish life in Odessa historically and today. I have explored stories of pre-Revolutionary, Soviet, Nazi-occupied and post-Soviet Odessa that were recounted related to me by elderly Odessan Jews and I have analyzed their place in, and opinions about, today's society. The various trajectories of middle-aged and younger Odessans also come to life in the pages of this work. The focus has been mainly on the events specifically related to the remaking, development and construction of Odessa's Jewishness by religious revival, philanthropic missions, Zionist projects, local tourism and other initiatives. However, it is important to remember that Jewish experiences of Odessa are by no means separated from the larger spheres of urban life and, as such, are heavily penetrated by the wider transitions of the Ukrainian nation state and global forces. I have made a sincere effort to incorporate these dimensions when possible. Among its other contributions, this study adds to the only recently emerging ethnography of post-Soviet Jewish communities that remained in the FSU (Golbert (2001a, b); Goluboff (2003, 2008); Cooper (2003, 1998).

Odessa as a Place

Throughout the thesis I have argued that Odessa's character as a highly distinctive place has historically shaped, and continues to shape, Jewish discourse in the city. It plays an important role in the way local Jews envision their histories, realities and destinies as different from the larger geo-political entities – the Russian Empire, the USSR and today the Ukrainian state – of which Odessa was/is a part. Local history has also served to differentiate the type of Jews native to Odessa from others who are perceived to be different on the basis of religious observance, mentality and socialization. These distinctions, however, make up a great part of the Odessa's myth, and are questioned and debated internally. Despite the aired contestations among its residents, Odessa still remains a meaningful place to live. Thus, notwithstanding the recent anti-essentialist turn that questions the assumption of bonds between people,

culture and territory (Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Lavie and Swedenburg 1996), this ethnography has demonstrated that place continues to be of importance to local Odessans as a source of identity, livelihood and social relations (Stefansson 2004:3). While I am not suggesting that place is the only factor influencing and shaping the orientation of Odessa's Jews or that the city is solely linked to Jewish people and experiences, Odessa as a place is an important reference in local cultural distinctions expressed by local Jewry in real and imagined terms.

At the same time, as I have also demonstrated, this attachment to Odessa as a place has been potentially fragmented by the voices and actions of newly arrived Jews, migrating Jews and visiting Jews who inhabit, approach or depart from Odessa with other visions and experiences of the city. Odessa's distinctiveness as a place is affected by post-Soviet emigration and immigration, exposed to new constellations of ethnoreligious identities (Jewish and non-Jewish), which present new patterns of belonging that challenge previous orders of local cultural transmission. Finally, as the city has become home to Jewish initiatives directed by American and Israeli umbrella organizations, it appears through their eyes as just one among any number of other post-Soviet cities in need of help and Jewish revival. Chapter 5 detailed some of the ways in which philanthropic missions and projects of development cast Odessa as a place of poverty, need, discrimination and Jewish emptiness. While some local Jews rejected such projections, finding them offensive to their status as *Odessits*, others were willing to engage in such interactions, perhaps because they were reliant on the donations which missions of this type collect.

In my analysis of Jewish revival I have probed the nature of these initiatives to examine what it is that is being revived, and on what basis, by whom and for whom? These issues were raised in Chapters 3, 4, 5 and 6 in relation to religious and Zionist callings, programs and organizations in the city. According to many of the activists involved, the current Jewish initiatives in Odessa do represent a renewal of Odessa's Jewish life.

The sheer fact that some Jewish Odessans are once again conducting public ceremonies to commemorate important life cycle rituals and the fact that Odessa now, after nearly 70 years, is a place where questions about Jewish identification are in open debate among Odessa's local and visiting Jews, indeed, reflects details of Odessa's pre-Revolutionary past which, following the years of Soviet rule, are once again part of the city's story. Yet I have argued that the revival of Jewish life in the post-Soviet era is in many ways not a return to the previous order of practice, observance and communal structure. Rather, it is a new product initiated by a plethora of foreign and local authorities, which invokes feelings of a new life path and post-Soviet orientation. I have questioned the application of the term "revival" to the currents events of Odessa's Jewish development on a number of levels. Chapter 3 has highlighted the difficulty involved in rebuilding the type of institutions that belonged in pre-Revolutionary Odessa and the newness of many of the city's current projects that some residents have difficulty describing as "Odessan". Chapter 4 and partially Chapters 5 and 6, however, looked beyond the problematic aspects of these processes to recognize that some individuals have welcomed and internalized new models of Jewish expression by becoming observant Jews or active Zionists. While their attachments to Judaism or the Israeli state can be interpreted as a renewal of religious practice or Zionist zeal in Odessa, both of which speak of Odessa's pre-Revolutionary past, many of the newly observant Jews I met actually envisioned themselves as exploring a new element of Odessa and new elements of themselves. Mapping how these paths of identification were negotiated within families and among friends of different orientation, at the same time these two chapters highlighted the partial, impermanent and sometimes revoked nature of the decision to become a *ludai*, a migrant, a Zionist, an Israeli or an otherwise affiliated Jew. These categories were merged with other meaningful orientations or compromised with other more suitable life styles.

The experiences of returnees and transmigrants explored in Chapter 6 provided another prism through which to analyze the ongoing influences that movement has

had on the development of Odessa's varied Jewish identities and communities. This ethnography thus adds to the existing literature on return migration and diaspora studies, demonstrating how Jews said to be living "in the diaspora" may actually experience their locale as their home, and also extend this sentiment to other locations where family and friends reside or which they connect to on the basis of language and culture (as, for instance, Russia). Home is thus, to borrow Stephan Feuchtwang's definition, a "reference to a territory of belonging" (2004:7). In Chapter 6 specifically I engaged with the question of migration and the loyalties and attachments that local Jews expressed toward Israel and other destinations. Given the mass initiatives supported by the Israeli state and the multiple familial, entrepreneurial and professional networks that connect Israel to the Ukraine, I was curious to see the impact and role of Israel in the everyday life of Odessa's population. My research found that Israel was indeed one of the countries to which Odessan Jews express an attachment (mainly conceived in terms of personal relations) but, for the majority, it is neither a center of their Jewish gravity nor a place to which they intended to return (in mythical or real terms).

In Odessa, where projects of Jewish revival remain intertwined with older legacies of Soviet ideology and competing systems of meaning embedded in being "Russian," "Jewish," "Ukrainian" or "Odessan," the reconstruction of Jewish life and practice has been anything but a linear process of growth. The research here challenges the common assumption that, within post-Socialist societies, "a widening spectrum of individuals and organizations are looking to the sacred" (Steinberg and Wanner 2008:17) and that religious affiliation is generally on the rise. This thesis has revealed that such religious "transformations" were far from all or nothing and were frequently multidirectional rather than unilinear, at least at the level of the individual. A trend toward joining a religious community is not necessarily a trend toward staying within it or continuing to follow its prescribed practices. As this work has demonstrated, where individuals in post-Soviet settings were initially drawn to religious affiliation, it was not necessarily for the sake of the "sacred," even if this reason later became part of their

new trajectory. In many cases, more pragmatic reasons brought Jews closer to organized Jewish life or Judaism. Within the affiliated community, and all the more outside it, as I have documented, Jews challenged one another on their motives for religious membership, while at the same time, both adherents and others were occasionally scrutinized by the Orthodox authorities.

It is, in my opinion, too early to predict whether the future will see a significant expansion in Odessa's Jewish religious communities and, if so, whether that will bring greater social distance or integration between the different strands of Jews in Odessa today. It remains an open question whether the religious adherence of what is currently a very small minority of the Jewish population will influence the majority or be affected by them, whether they might develop jointly with secular and non-observant Jews or in isolation from each other. Moreover, it will be interesting to see how Odessa, once the breeding ground of liberal Judaism for all the Russian Empire, will balance its religious hierarchy and whether the current Reform congregation will succeed in reclaiming Odessa's famed Brody Synagogue and potentially come to be favored among the city's observant Jews.

Unlike other projects of religious or secular renewal, restoration and revival witnessed in the former Soviet territories – which are open and available to all – Jewish leaders for the most part followed strict criteria based on religious or Zionist Law of Return that regulate access and recognition and, in turn, challenged the previous markers of Jewish identification, whether those specified by the state or the cultural markers of Jewishness – education, refinement, wit and intellectuality – adopted more informally. Thus, like Cooper (1998) and Golbert (2001), this thesis has demonstrated the competing categories of Jewish membership that have penetrated Odessa's space.

What is occurring in contemporary Odessa cannot be characterized in any single homogeneous way, whether as a new trend or as continuity with the past. On the one hand, this ethnography has emphasized the fluidity of ethnic and religious boundaries in Odessa, where the categories "Russian," "Jewish," "Ukrainian" and "Christian" at

times merge, especially in the still powerful narrative of being “Odessan” and thus “cosmopolitan.” On the other hand, despite the abolition of Soviet Jewish nationality, today, for a host of reasons – emigration opportunities, new centers of Jewish religious, Zionist and cultural activity, social benefits offered to affiliated Jews and separate Jewish schools – the ethnoreligious category “Jewish” is becoming more concretized and functional in the realm of sociality and coexistence of ordinary Odessans. The other side of the coin is that the internationally funded social welfare now available to Jews and not others means that “Jew” is no longer a negative epithet but an object of envy and occasional resentment.

Odessa and Cosmopolitanism

The phenomenon of altered patterns of coexistence influenced by the fragmentation of the USSR and the policies which replaced it is part of the larger puzzle which has recently attracted scholars to Odessa and other historically international cities whose cosmopolitan values are said to be under threat. Beyond the previous explorations of cosmopolitanism as a philosophical and political idea, anthropologists have recently approached the topic in terms of practices of socialization among different cultures, ethnicities, religions and people. As Humphrey (2004) notes, the new vocabulary of “rooted cosmopolitanism” (Cohen 1992), “vernacular cosmopolitanism” (Bhabha 1996) and “actually existing cosmopolitanisms” (Malcomson 1998) arises from a characteristically anthropological acknowledgement of diversity and inevitable attachments to place. To take Ulf Hannerz’s definition of what he calls “genuine cosmopolitanism,” I see cosmopolitanism as an orientation to, and a “willingness to engage with the Other,” which Hannerz portrays as a “state of mind” (1996:103) as well as the more practical coexistence and interaction of different ethnoreligious groups and their acceptance and valuing of each other’s cultural capital.

Arguing both for and against Odessa’s cosmopolitan nature, Richardson rightly points out that “Odessa of the early 21st century is much *less* ethnically diverse than it was even before WWII, while its economic and port status is more marginal than during the

Soviet period" (2004:204). At the same time, in her article "Living Cosmopolitanism? 'Tolerance,' Religion and Local Identity in Odessa" she asserts that, despite the facts on the ground, local discourse posits "Odessans' openness to others and to the world, the mixing of people in the city, and the stark separation of politics and everyday life, as in other cosmopolitan imperial cities" (Richardson 2006:228). Richardson eloquently demonstrates how the theme of tolerance embedded in the cosmopolitan discourse of local Odessans has been tested by historical and real life events: ethnic, political and religious conflicts have shown the limits of Odessa's long-standing myth of mixing, and peaceful coexistence. In turn, Richardson concludes, certain features of cosmopolitanism (including tolerance) have become a trope of city identity rather than a lived reality.

Skvirskaya and Humphrey have examined the fate of Odessa and Bukhara more recently, concentrating on coexistence, relationality and everyday interactions of different migrant, ethnic and religious groups in the region. They argue that Odessa displays what they term "disappearing cosmopolitan" traits (Skvirskaya and Humphrey 2007), as its "classic Greek, Jewish, and German diasporas" have moved away and other new migrants from rural hinterlands and other foreign countries such as Turkey, China, Chechnya etc. have entered but not mixed into the social milieu of Odessa. Rather, as Skvirskaya puts it elsewhere, "the city with its new 'lineages' of Ukrainian "provincial" immigrants and "alien" foreigners can be thought of as somehow "post-cosmopolitan" (Skvirskaya 2006:3). Describing an Odessan courtyard where many old residents do not know their new neighbors, relations which no longer mimic those of a big international family, she notes that "indifference, rather than engagement with difference" appear to be the "new mode of co-residence...and coexistence in the city at large"(Skvirskaja 2010:88). Despite Humphrey and Skvirskaya's claims about the physical outflow of Odessa's Jews specifically, the city still has a relatively large and rooted Jewish population and a growing number of returnees who represent a Jewish element of city life and a symbol of its cosmopolitanism. At the same time, this thesis has demonstrated that Odessa continues to be described as a "Jewish" city in local

usage and this, in turn plays an important role in proclaiming the city's diversity. In this way, the memory of the city's Jewishness and its cosmopolitanism continues to penetrate the image Odessans have about their city and acts as a basis for contrasting Odessa to other Ukrainian cities such as Lviv and even Kiev and the policies that emanate from the central government of the state (Richardson 2006:228). Thus, one might say that Jewishness has a metonymic relationship to Odessa and its famed cosmopolitanism: Odessa's Jewishness stands for Odessa. As explored in Chapter 7, many of Odessa's distinctive characteristics are the very characteristics ascribed to Jews. In marking itself as Jewish, the city proudly announces its diversity: Jews stand for all the diverse groups that the city has hosted over the years with a (perhaps idealized) degree of tolerance.²⁵³ At the same time, it is a Jewishness understood as distinctively local, inscribed in physical locales and particular ways of being Jewish, and this too is part of what stands for Odessa as a distinctively cosmopolitan city. As metonym of cosmopolitan Odessa, the city's "Jewishness" does not depend on sheer physical numbers of Jews nor absolute adherence to its mythical tolerance. Yet there must be limits and conditions for sustaining even a mythical, metonymic Odessan cosmopolitan Jewishness and current circumstances are probing what those are.

Support for this analysis may be found in the edited volume by Ramer and Ruble *Place, Identity and Urban Culture: Odessa and New Orleans* (2008), which highlights the unique qualities exhibited through the interaction of place and diversity visible in Odessa and New Orleans historically and today. Shying away from the term "cosmopolitanism" but, under the rubric of "urbane," describing essentially the same "willingness to engage with the Other," Ruble emphasizes the specificities of Odessa and New Orleans as "model" cities in exhibiting multiculturalism on their streets.

²⁵³ While tolerance is a deeply ingrained part of the city's influential myth, Odessa's pogroms (specifically the pogrom of 1905), the events of World War II and the current offenses of anti-Semitism and painted swastikas that haunt Odessa's streets are also part of the city's reality and cannot be ignored when describing local notions of coexistence and sociality. Also, the intolerance of local Jews and others to newly arrived migrants, many of whom are said to be from rural parts of the FSU, dubbed as "*priezjje*" (newcomers) also reveals limitations to the real life validation of local tolerance both historically and today.

According to the authors, the mixture of ethnicities, religions and foreigners is displayed and facilitated through their inviting city layouts. The many pedestrian streets, parks and public squares, plentiful access to diverse cuisine and colorful architecture all enhance the kind of contacts and exchanges that may take place in these two places. In the "diverse" settings of both cities, Ramer argues in the introductory essay, the minority status of any single group may be less palpably felt by its members and the distinctive sense of urban identity by extension enhances its residents' sense of their personal identity as "special" and "significant" (2008:5). However, specifically concerning Odessa, Ruble does acknowledge the lurking threat of homogenization visible in the current imposition of Ukrainian nation building, which could potentially undo Odessa's historical modes of coexistence.

My work has added to this dialogue in a number of meaningful ways. It has, first, illustrated how debates about Odessa's post-Soviet character, to which Humphrey, Skvirskaya, Richardson, Ramer and Ruble turn our attention, are as vocalized within any one ethnic group as they are among the larger city population who pay tribute to the importance of their city's multicultural foundations. At the same time this thesis has demonstrated how practices and understandings of Jewishness and cosmopolitanism among the city's Jewry do appear to be in flux. In and beyond the "imagined community" (Anderson 1983) of Jewish Odessa, foreign rabbis and visiting emissaries in theory provide a new "foreign" dimension to Odessa's standing social constitution and, as do returnees and transmigrants, thus embellish the existing diversity of Odessa's city life. But, as my research has illustrated, some Odessans regard these same foreigners and their models of Jewishness as bringing a more isolating vision, and narrowing the seemingly "open" and "tolerant" notions of Odessa's Jewishness.

On another level, the question of the stereotype of Odessa as a Jewish city is also linked to its stereotype as a cosmopolitan city and is thus part of the larger dialogue that city residents voice in light of Ukraine's efforts to construct a single and homogeneous nation state. In Chapter 7 specifically, I argued that, despite its

questionable validity as a literal description, the image of Odessa as a Jewish city was deployed by social actors in a variety of ways to subvert and resist processes of homogenization actively being imposed through Ukrainization, and to work to reinstate the “international,” “open” and “tolerant” nature of the place, where Jews and others can enjoy their individual freedoms, tolerate, engage with and enhance the lifestyle of others.

Jewishness in that regard may be seen as a metonym of cosmopolitan Odessa: the fight for its recognition as a Jewish place is by extension a battle for its historically constituted, albeit weakened, cosmopolitanism. If leaders of national and religious movements would adopt these native sentiments and incorporate them in their visions of Odessa’s future, they could possibly achieve a greater level of integration, understanding and prosperity. As Babel said, “if you think about it, it is a town in which one can live free and easy” (Babel 2002:71).

Visible Trends and Informed Wondering

As with all projects, this one has its limitations, which can nonetheless serve as avenues for new enquiries and further research. This study is still one of only a few ethnographies of post-Soviet Jewish communities, which is still a rather undeveloped field largely dominated by historians and sociologists. While a body of existing literature addresses Soviet and later ex-Soviet Jews abroad, in their new roles as immigrants, I urge scholars to turn their attention to those populations who remained. It is important to focus on the many personal and professional networks (real and virtual) that connect these populations to other locales and feed back into remaining communities. It is clearly the case that travel between countries of the FSU and those of its Jewish diaspora is rapidly developing. A recent agreement between the Russian

Federation and Israel in 2008,²⁵⁴ for instance, means that their citizens are no longer required to hold a visa in order to cross each other's borders. Similarly, Ukraine's no-visa policy for US and European citizens also affects the frequency and nature of migrants' returns, whether temporary or permanent.

A multi-sited study of returnees and their patterns of resettlement, the reasons and motivations for returns and modes of socialization, among "stay back" groups and other returnees, is another area deserving further ethnographic attention. It is still unclear from those returnees I met whether the social distance displayed between themselves and others will lay the ground for the development of a separate returnee identity or returnee enclaves, as other scholars on return migration have described in other contexts (see Cornish et al. 1999 for Malawi; Levy 2004 for Israel and Morocco; Markowitz 2004 for USA; Mandel 1990 for Germany and Turkey, and others). Moreover, it is essential to place the little that we know about return migration of ex-Soviet Jews into the greater body of literature on homecomings, returns and relocations (Markowitz and Stefansson 2004; Levy and Weingrod 2005; Mandel 2008; Hannerz 1996; Oxfeld and Long 2004).

In Odessa itself many elements of Jewish life could be elaborated in future academic efforts. For example, as this thesis has described, one of the major changes in the context of post-Soviet Odessa has been the appearance of various Jewish organizations and institutions that link primarily the young, but also elderly and middle-aged Odessan Jews, to a sense of Jewish community through a network of social benefits, activities, work and travel opportunities, education and more. While I acknowledge the divergent views and agendas of the numerous interest groups involved in nurturing and "reviving" local Jewish life, the overall trend in defining Jewishness through association and affiliation (however partial) to a Jewish collective (of one kind

²⁵⁴ Agreement between the Government of the Russian Federation and the Government of the State of Israel on Mutual Abolition of Visa Requirements, signed on March 20, 2008. Both sides have completed the necessary national procedures and it will shortly come into effect.

or another), and public acknowledgment of these alliances, is a new phenomenon whose developments deserve to be carefully observed in the future and among future generations of ex-Soviet Jews. While I have indicated in this thesis that some Jews already feel a down curve in religious revival and in Jewish affiliation altogether as other interests or responsibilities take precedence, I wonder if Jewish participation might once again become of importance for the same individuals when it comes to raising their own offspring and forming family traditions of their own. To answer these questions, long-term and multigenerational research is of paramount importance.

Another visible trend in Odessa is the rise in private and religious education. A study of the city's Jewish schools, their curriculum, teaching methods, language of instruction, pupils and personnel would contribute new perspectives to the field of post-Soviet Jewish studies, identity formation and education. Expanding such a project to include research in home settings and the family environment would also allow one to study how possibly different social models of Jewish identification and orientation are explored by children. During the interactions I had with school children and youth, many claimed to teach their parents how to be "properly" Jewish. Transmission of knowledge thus, in the context of Odessa, travels in multiple directions, very much including child to parent, as is also visible in other places, especially among immigrant communities. Studying this phenomenon could reveal new ways of learning in post-Socialist societies, where children serve as mediators between the different settings they inhabit.

Furthermore, Odessa could serve as a highly suitable base for researching mixed families who carry the legendary Soviet Ideology of assimilation into a context of altered social hierarchies. As Richardson has pointed out, "whereas in the Soviet period assimilation might have been 'normal' and even desirable, following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the revival of Jewish communal life, mixed ancestry has today become problematic for some individuals in a way that it was not in Soviet times" (2006:235). As religious and national institutions become more visible in Odessa, as elsewhere in the FSU, what can we see happening among families of mixed

origins? As religion is reintroduced into the context of post-Socialist societies, will religious belief or ethnic background play an enhanced role in future marriage decisions of Jews and others and how will these processes influence local tolerance, mixing and the cosmopolitan tendencies of the Odessa population?

Partly because I myself saw individuals change their opinions, affiliations, attachments and reasoning towards their own and others' Jewish identifications, and partly because of the uncertain social and economic context of Odessa's institutional development, I chose not to make premature speculations about any particular path of development or trends but, rather, opted to leave this research as it stands, inclusive of its gaps, mismatches and inconsistencies. Transformation in everyday religion, culture, communal life and representation of Jews is, of course, part of the history of the greater Jewish population and thus not specific to Odessa or the present.²⁵⁵ However, the specific factors that bring particular elements of new and old practices and traditions onto or out of the horizon of visibility – and the exact outcomes of changes (which are the subject of this thesis) – are specific to Odessa and its post-Soviet reality.

My hope is that, even in these multidirectional trajectories, the people whose personalities, stories and emotions make up the treasured elements of this ethnography would find that my account of their lives truly reflects their realities in all its everyday density and contrariness.

"It is impossible to say good bye to Odessa even when leaving the place," one of my friends told me upon my departure. "Once an *Odessit*, always an *Odessit*," she concluded.

²⁵⁵ Webber argues that throughout Jewish history "there has been a constant redrawing of the cultural boundaries as a consequence of migrations, persecutions, and other fluctuations in Jewish [I would also add non-Jewish] social and economic fortunes" (1994b:74).

Appendix 1

The Pale of Settlement (1835–1917)

Map available online at www.friendspartners.org/partners/beyond-the-pale/eng-captions/29.9.html.

Appendix 2

Glossary and List of Organizations

Important Terms and Expressions

Aliyah (Heb) – Emigration to Israel.

Baal Teshuvah (Heb) – Literally “master of return.” A term used to describe Jews who embraced Orthodox Judaism as a way of life on their own initiative and often later in life in contrast to those Jews who were born and raised in Orthodox environments.

Bar (male) and **Bat** (female) **Mitzvah** (Heb) – Literally “one to whom the commandments apply.” The term refers to the ceremony conducted for young boys and girls to celebrate their “coming of age” and their willingness to accept commandments of God required of adult men and women.

Bris or **Brit Milah** (Heb) – Circumcision of males. The Jewish circumcision ritual is traditionally conducted on the eighth day after birth as a physical marker of one’s covenant with God and the Jewish people. Some rabbinic authorities argue that males, although born of Jewish mothers, are not considered fully Jewish if they remain uncircumcised.

Chelovek (Rus) – Human being, person.

Dacha (Rus) – Summer residence.

Druzhba Narodov (Rus) – Friendship of Nations, a Soviet slogan.

Dusha (Rus) – Soul.

Evrei (male), **Evreika** (female) (Rus) – Jew; in the Soviet context this is related to one’s nationality rather than religion.

Evreïstvo (Rus/Ukr) – Jewishness.

Giur (Heb) – Conversion to Judaism.

Goi (Yid) – Derogatory name for a Gentile (non-Jew).

Halakhah (Heb) – Jewish Orthodox law and branch of rabbinic literature which deals with religious obligations of members of the Jewish faith, both in their interpersonal relationships and in their ritual performance. It encompasses all aspects of human behavior and lays down a strict definition of a Jew as one born to a Jewish mother or properly converted to Judaism.

Hanukkah (Heb) – Festival of Lights. Eight-day holiday commemorating the rededication of the Second Temple in Jerusalem (2nd century BCE).

Hanukkiyah (Heb) – Also known as Menorah. A special candelabrum used for the lighting of the candles during **Hanukkah**.

Hasidism (Heb) – Popular revivalist movement founded by Israel ben Eliezer (Baal Shem Tov) in 18th-century Podolia. It was a response to what was felt to be overly academic approach taken by Orthodox Judaism. Hasidism aimed to bring Judaism to every man irrespective of his level of education and literacy. As a movement, it emphasizes piety, mysticism, and **mitzvot** (good deeds) judged as individual merits.

Haskalah (Heb) – Jewish Enlightenment. Popular movement of the 18th century originating in Germany that stressed acculturation and assimilation of Jews living among Gentiles by means of secular education, teachings of modern languages and other aspects of socialization. An adaptation of Judaism to the changing conditions of the modern world without abandoning Jewish traditions as a whole.

Heder (Heb) – Literally “room.” An all-boy religious school where young males are taught Jewish traditions and history.

Hevrah Kaddisha (Heb) – Jewish burial society.

Huppah (Heb) – A canopy used in the ceremony of a Jewish wedding under which the bride and groom stand, symbolic of their future house together. The term is also used to describe the actual wedding ceremony.

Intelligentsia (Rus) – A social stratum made up of people professionally engaged in intellectual work.

Iudei (male), **Iudeika** (female) (Rus) – Someone who adheres to Judaism; a religious Jew. See also *evrei*.

Karaites (Heb), **Kara'im** (singular Rus) – followers of Karaism – a sect of Judaism that rejects the Oral Law embodied in the Talmud.

Kashrut (Heb) – Jewish dietary laws that designate foods as kosher, that is, “fit” or “proper” for consumption according with the biblical, *halakhic* and rabbinic laws.

Kehillah (Heb) – Jewish self governing council. In the broader sense refers to a “congregation.”

Komsomol (Rus) – Communist Youth Legion.

Kul'tura (Rus) – Culture. *Kul'turnyy* – someone considered cultured, cultivated.

Maskilim (Heb) – Followers of *Haskalah*.

Matzah (Heb) – Unleavened bread eaten during the holiday of **Pesah** as a substitute for leavened bread, cakes etc.

Mentalitet (Rus) – Mentality.

Mezuzah (Heb) – A piece of parchment inscribed with specific verses from the Torah usually affixed on doorposts of Jewish homes and businesses in a decorative case.

Mikvah (Heb) – Purifying bath. Natural water used for rituals of purification by Jewish women before marriage, after menstruation and childbirth. Also used by some

men before major holidays; as part of traditional procedure for conversion to Judaism; and for utensils and dishes during the process of kashering. See also **Niddah**.

Minyan (Heb) – Quorum of ten men necessary for public prayer.

Mistekhovye (Rus) – (Derogatory) Jews from small *shtetls*.

Mitzvot (Heb) – Good deeds.

Narod (Rus) – Population, nationhood.

Natzionalnost (Rus) – Nationality, ethnicity.

Niddah (Heb) – Literally “separation.” Refers specifically to the regulations and rituals concerning menstruation and, by extension, a woman is said to be *niddah* (impure) when she is menstruating. According to the laws of *niddah*, a married woman must fully immerse herself in the **mikvah** in order to purify herself before resuming sexual relations with her husband.

Obshchina (Rus) – Community.

Odessit (male), **Odessitka** (female) (Rus) – Native of Odessa.

Olim (Heb) – Immigrants to Israel. *Olim Hadashim* – New immigrants in Israel.

Pesah (Heb) – The Jewish holiday of Passover, which celebrates the Exodus and freedom of the Israelites from Ancient Egypt.

Priezzhe (Rus) – Newcomers.

Propiska (Rus) – Certificate of residency.

Purim (Heb) – Jewish festival usually celebrated in a form of a carnival to commemorate the deliverance of Persian Jewry from their intended destruction by Haman.

Refusenik (Rus) – A person refused an exit visa during Soviet rule and thus unable to leave the territory of the USSR.

Rodina (Rus) – Homeland, native land.

Shlihim (Heb) – Emissaries.

Seder (Heb) – Literally “order.” Refers to the order of the home ritual feast observed on the first and second night of the **Pesah** festival.

Shabbat (Heb) – Jewish day of rest (Sabbath).

Shtetl (Yid) – A small town or village.

Stadnoe chustvo (Rus) – Herd effect, herd instinct.

Sukkah (Heb) – A ritual outdoor dwelling (booth or hut) built temporarily for the holiday of **Sukkot**. During the seven days of the holiday Jews take their meals and occasionally sleep in the *sukkah*, which evokes the type of hut in which ancient Israelites dwelt during their years of wandering in the desert after the Exodus from Egypt and is intended to reflect God’s benevolence in providing for all the Jews during that time.

Sukkot (Heb) – One of the three pilgrim festivals when Jews commemorate the 40-year journey to Israel. It is also known and celebrated as a harvest festival.

Talmud (Heb) – Authoritative body of Jewish rabbinic law and history accumulated over a period of seven centuries.

Tefillin (Heb) – Phylacteries. Two black leather boxes which contain scrolls of parchment inscribed with biblical verses. They are worn by religious male Jews during morning prayer on weekdays. They serve to remind a praying Jew of his covenant with God.

Tsitsit (Heb) – Fringes worn by religious men on the four corners of garments.

Torah (Heb) – The first five books of the Hebrew Bible (Books of Moses).

Vrag naroda (Rus) – Enemy of the State.

Yeshivah (Heb) – An institution dedicated to advanced rabbinic study.

Yiddish – Germanic language written with the Hebrew alphabet developed around the 10th century. Primarily used by Jews in Central and Eastern Europe (Ashkenazim).

Zhid (male), **Zhidovka** (female) (Rus) – Derogatory name for a Jew.

Organizations and Programs

American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee – known as *Joint*. International Jewish organization that works to promote Jewish well being and cultural survival in the FSU. Operating in Odessa since 1990.

Emanu-El Temple – Reform Congregation of Odessa.

Gmilus Hesed – Jewish club for the elderly sponsored by *Joint* responsible for providing material, medical and social aid to over 8,000 elderly Jews of the Odessa region.

Hillel – International Jewish youth organization. Operating in Odessa since 1999.

Israeli Cultural Center – An official consulate of the state of Israel which aids prospective immigrants in making *aliyah*. The center also functions as an educational and cultural facility for those interested in Israeli life and culture.

Makkabi – Jewish Athletic Organization.

Mazl Tov – Early Child Development Program run by Migdal.

Migdal – Jewish community center also known as the International Center of Jewish Community Programs. Founded in 1991 with the Odessa Jewish Musical Theatre, Migdal Or.

Naael – A one-year study abroad program organized for youth (under the age of 16) to experience life in Israel.

Shomrei Shabbos – The Chabad Orthodox Congregation in Odessa.

Sokhnut – The official name of Jewish Agency for Israel (JAFI) in FSU. An Israeli organization (a branch of the World Zionist Association) which functions in the countries of the FSU to educate Jews about Israel and assist them in making *aliyah*. Has been officially operating in the Ukraine since 1991.

Taglit (Taglit-Birthright Israel) – A free 13-day program which involves visiting and learning about Israel organized for young people aged 18–26.

Tikva Or Sameach – Lithuanian (Litvak) Orthodox Congregation.

World ORT – Jewish non-profit organization focused on education and vocational training around the world. Odessa ORT sponsors public Jewish School 94.

Appendix 3

Olga's Story

The following is the text that Olga read out to the UJC delegation in Chapter 5.

On the front of the card:

Before I became involved in the Jewish Agency's [i.e., Sokhnut] youth club and went to the summer camp, I didn't know anything about being Jewish. We didn't speak about it in our house. When I started to learn and experience what it means to be Jewish I changed in a fundamental way.

On the back of the card Olga's full story was elaborated:

Growing up in Odessa, Olga Samburenko (22) had very little connection to Judaism or Israel. An only child, Olga went to the Jewish Agency Activity Center (JAC) with a friend, where she was exposed to Judaism for the first time. Olga, the victim of vicious anti-Semitism from her fellow classmates, "never thought that, more than 60 years after the Holocaust, this hatred could rise again."

Once Olga started learning about Jewish history, Zionism and Israel, "it was like a spark was ignited inside of me. I wanted to know more and more." She attended a Jewish Agency summer camp and youth club and soon became a camp counselor and youth club leader. Her dream was to imbue younger children with the beauty of Jewish identity that she had found. "I taught them everything I knew so that they could experience for themselves what it meant to be Jewish. Jewish identity is a very personal thing," says Olga.

Many of the young people in Olga's youth group eventually emigrated to Israel and are serving in the Israeli Defense Force. Olga's journey took longer. She met and fell in love with a young man at the summer camp and wanted to make *aliyah* but Olga's parents would not allow it. At the age of 17, the young couple wanted to marry but Olga's parents rejected this idea as well. With a heavy heart, Olga moved to Germany with her parents.

After two years in Germany, Olga could not stand it anymore. "I told my parents that it was very difficult for me to live in this land where so many Jews were murdered." She went to meet her boyfriend, who had made *aliyah*, and the young couple married. Olga and her husband are now living in Eilat where Olga is learning Hebrew at a Jewish Agency

ulpan [Hebrew language course] on Kibbutz Yotvata and her husband is a supervisor at the Mei Eden spring water plant. They are excited to be together, building their future in Israel.

Below Olga's photograph, the following amounts are listed:

Cost: \$455 funds one child for one week of a Jewish Agency summer camp.

Cost: \$8,000 funds one Jewish Agency youth club in a city in the FSU for one year.

Cost \$865 enrolls one new immigrant in a five-month Kibbutz ulpan.

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