

JOACHIM SCHLÖR

**'ON THE THIRD HAND...'**

**News from a Rediscovered Civilisation in Memories of Odessa**

If you go onto the Internet and search for 'Odessa,' one of the places you will be directed to is Odessa, Texas. Its homepage will tell you all about the football and baseball teams of an American city which as far as I have been able to discover has no connection at all with the Odessa you were looking for. The surprise of finding something so different might well have provided material for this paper, which is concerned with memories and images rather than with places solidly rooted in reality. However, all the places I shall be talking about do contain something of 'Odessa.' The name of that wonderful city has been wandering the world for some considerable time, and Texas is by no means the only place where one can find an Odessa. But one can also find something of 'Odessa' in places with other names. One such place is Berlin, the city where I live and where in 1999 some of us witnessed a strange event called '*Jüdische Kulturtage*' [Days of Jewish Culture] dedicated to Odessa, or at any rate to an image of Odessa. Another is Tel-Aviv, which lies – if we accept the view of Chaim Nachman Bialik, and I strongly suggest we do – a mere hand's breadth beyond the shores of the Black Sea. Yet another is New York, and in particular Brighton Beach in Brooklyn, where Yossl Bergner painted old people in Eastern European-style clothes turning their backs on the sad pleasures of Coney Island and instead looking inwards, trying to find – well, an Odessa. And there is, as I have said, the Internet, which offers more Odessas and memories of Odessa than any other place.

And there is Odessa itself. I want to talk about all of these places here, and politeness requires that I should start with Odessa. My first visit there was in 1993, and I am still so grateful to Lena Karakina, Anya Misyuk, Zhura Issaev, Mark Naidorf, Yuri Boyko, Aleksander Beyderman and so many others for helping me find a way into a place which at that time I could hardly understand. I had studied the history of Zionism and its realisation in the land of Israel. Names of places are a good starting point for discussion in a country where so many people have come from elsewhere. You say 'Berlin' or 'Warsaw', or maybe 'Baghdad', and this immediately evokes images that set the discussion going. But when you say 'Odessa,' something quite different happens. People lean back and relax somehow and say: "Ah, Odessa. That's special." I always wondered what was so special about it, and so I came. From Tel-Aviv.

## ODESSA IN TEL-AVIV

The *Ruslan* was really nothing but a wretched cargo ship, the most miserable of its kind, with four cabins in the stern which were occupied by the red-eyed captain, by his two officers – the navigator, who was occasionally sober, and the chief engineer, who was always drunk – by the great Mr Ussishkin and by the rich merchant Yekutiel Shubov and his fat wife. Apart from these cabins there was not a single bed on the *Ruslan*. Everyone slept in the vast belly of the ship, which was made up of nothing but coal, soot, ancient mounds of dirt, rotting ropes and rusting chains. Amid bitter cold and winter storms the wretched, unbelievably filthy ship staggered like a sleepwalker, crammed with sick and hungry people. It was only by a whisker that this pitiable *Mayflower* managed to leave Odessa at all. [...] The people who had been unable to break away from the bosom of Mother Russia during the Great War were waiting in crumbling hotels, in the streets close to the docks, in the stinking alleys, to return to Eretz Israel: Chassidim from Jerusalem, among them the gifted actor, a silk merchant, two cabinet-makers, a workshop owner from Haifa and two cantors, an electrical engineer and even a telephone engineer...<sup>1</sup>

Dan Tsalka's great novel *A Thousand Hearts*, published in Israel in 1991, has recently appeared in German translation. The story opens in 1919, with the resonant sentence, "For the first time a great architect set out for Tel-Aviv." A voyage is made from one place to another. The first is the southern point of departure from the Russian Empire – Odessa, founded in 1794. The other does not yet properly exist. Founded in 1909 as a small, hygienic Jewish suburb of Jaffa – "Jaffa, pearl of the seas, O Queen of Upper and Lower Egypt" – Tel-Aviv simply grew of its own accord and suddenly had far more inhabitants, far more houses and streets than its founders had intended. But no proper architecture, no planning, no building authority. The architects – like everyone else – came from outside: Ezra Marinsky, for instance, came on that filthy ship, the *Ruslan*, from Odessa in 1919. Odessa was one pre-history of Tel-Aviv, and hence of 'Israel in Palestine,' long before the other pre-histories arrived, from Warsaw (in the mid-1920s) or Berlin (starting in 1932/33). The meeting of Odessa and Tel-Aviv was to give rise to something new, and for this too Dan Tsalka has a telling image, which he sets in a dialogue:

"You are familiar with the oriental style?"

"Yes, Mr Bialik."

"The Orient? Eretz Israel? "

"From books."

"Difficult?"

"Difficult, Mr Bialik."

"The style?"

"No, not if you have builders and craftsmen."

"Could you build me a house in the oriental style?"

"In any style you like, Mr Bialik."

1 D. Tsalka, *Tausend Herzen* (Trans. B. Linner) (Stuttgart, Munich, 2002), p. 12.

"I'm asking you – in the Eretz Israel style?"

"I can do that."

"But inside – Western-style comfort?"

"All the latest conveniences."

"Will he be able to do that, Ravnitzky?"

"Don't you remember, Chaim Nachman? This is the young man whom Ussishkin drew wearing a pith helmet, riding on an elephant and mowing down the Ugandists." [...]

"Send a boy, Ravnitzky. They say that Odessa itself is like a Levantine city, because in the cities of the Levant everyone sends boys to get things like coffee or tea. What do you think, Ezra?"

"I have never been in a Levantine city, Mr Bialik."

"Apart from Odessa ..."

Mr Bialik and Mr Ravnitzky are sitting in a settlement called Tel-Aviv, talking about Mr Ussishkin. Talking about the intense sorrow in 'Hebrew Odessa' when news came of Dr Herzl's death. Talking about Odessa as though it were already Tel-Aviv and were situated in the Levant and Hebrew-speaking like the *ir ha-ivrit ha-rishona*, the first Hebrew city. Talking about the Ravnitzky & Polinkovsky bookshop on the corner of Richelieu and Arnautskaya as though it were already on the corner of Allenby and – well, Bialik Street. But Messrs Bialik, Ravnitzky, Ussishkin and many others have also brought Odessa to Tel-Aviv – the Odessa that was a prefiguration of Tel-Aviv, and the other Odessa that became a memory.

Sleepless, unable to concentrate, devoid of energy, Asher Ginzberg, Ahad Ha'am, came to Tel-Aviv in May 1921 and was given a house close to the high school, the Herzliya Gymnasium, 'in what was the very center of the new, bustling town.' Steven Zipperstein writes:

Here for the last years of his life, despite his infirmities, his bitterness, and his insatiable anger, he managed to recreate something of his original, beloved Odessa circle. He witnessed the birth of the Hebrew University and had a hand in shaping its first, tentative steps as an institution of higher learning. He lived out these last years in the world's first Hebrew-speaking city, Tel-Aviv, whose mayor, Meir Dizengoff, one of his former Odessa devotees, looked to him as something of a philosopher king. This new city's main academic institution (the Herzliya Gymnasium) saw itself inspired by him; Tel-Aviv's first daily newspaper, Ha'aretz, was edited by one of his own men, Moshe Glickson, a devoted follower who wrote the first biography of Ahad Ha'am.

Zipperstein describes Tel-Aviv as being, so to speak, Odessa-made. Mr Bialik and Mr Ginzberg did not go to synagogue, and Bialik was seen to smoke in the street. The city of Tel-Aviv

was itself perhaps the most vivid example of the essentially secular character of their collective vision for the Jewish future. Designed, by and large, by the men of Ahad Ha'am's Odessa entourage, most importantly its future mayor Meir Dizengoff, no propositions were made in its original plans for the location of a synagogue.

The high school, *beit shelanu*, was more important. A mixture of city images and city memories: London's Hampstead Garden City, the Vienna Ringstrasse (and rather untidy-looking fish market) – and “the seaside promenade of Odessa.” Bialik spoke Russian and Yiddish in the street. Ahad Ha'am's Odessa ‘circle’ continued to be influential in the administration and in the shaping of cultural policy; he even attempted to revive the old Bnei Moshe circle, but without success.

Many things did not go as he wished. His sleeplessness persisted, as did a sense of nostalgia – for London. The open wound of the circumstances of the creation of Israel, the treatment of the Arab population, seemed to him to presage the defeat of hope, the destruction of the dream. What has remained of Odessa in Israel? Bialik died in 1934, Dizengoff two years later. Did ‘Odessa’ in Tel-Aviv, Odessa in Israel perish with them? What certainly lives on is an image, a memory.

### ODESSA IN ODESSA

Anyone coming here with an old map of the town has been dealt a good hand. The streets have been given back their old names, which evoke the history that has gone before, that may return, that is certainly longed for. The ethnic groups, Greeks, Armenians, Jews, who were responsible for Odessa's economic rise, unparalleled elsewhere in Europe, are once again represented on the street maps, though they are hardly visible as segments of the population – but that may change. *Anything may change*. The names of the city's founders, of Catherine and her first governor, Count Richelieu, are back. The Café Richelieu at the top of the great Steps has gone, but the desire for a new café in the city centre was voiced soon after the collapse of communism (and has now been fulfilled, in a peculiar way, by a restaurant calling itself ‘Déjà-Vu’ which uses Soviet and American memorabilia to recreate the Cold War, something I would not have expected in 1993). Walking like this, hesitantly, associatively, in circles, down one street, back up another, is the only way to explore this Odessa, for the guidebooks are even more confused than anyone else. The texts in my luggage are mainly by Jewish authors. My idea, as I walk around Odessa, is that the literature and history of the city's Jews might be appropriate keys to an understanding of the place.

The houses themselves have little to tell; the numerous memorial plaques give a false picture. I have with me the memoirs of the Jewish historian Shimon Dubnow, who was murdered by the National Socialists in Riga. In his flat in Odessa, “in a large room looking out onto the sea”, representatives of a Jewish-nationalist, Zionist-orientated movement used to meet together, by no means united on all points but certainly united in the struggle against rising anti-Semitism. There was Ahad Ha'am, “striding up and down the long room, holding his usual cigarette or a glass of tea”; the advocate of a cultural, spiritual form of Zionism, he went to Tel-Aviv in the early

1920s, where his house, close to the Hebrew Gymnasium, became a meeting-place and his library was to form the basis of today's city library, Beit Ariela. There was "the energetic Dizengoff," who came to Jaffa on the *Ruslan* in 1904, became the spokesman of a group calling itself *Achusath Bayit* which, with a loan from the Jewish National Fund, built the first sixty houses of the settlement that was named Tel-Aviv, and was mayor of his city until his death in 1936. And there was, "furthermore, the secretary of the Palestine Committee, the lively and active Druyanov," who was to write, in the 1940s, the first book about the new city, *Sefer Tel-Aviv*. "I believe," writes Dubnow, "that among those who attended those meetings of ours I first saw the young Chaim Nachman Bialik." Bialik came to the old-new land in 1924 after first spending three years in Berlin, and his house was to be the first and most important crystallisation point for the Hebrew culture that was growing up in Tel-Aviv, and a place of pilgrimage for all visitors to Palestine.

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

Those who have written about Odessa in recent years have had one main theme: the emigration which is remorselessly killing the city. Life is abandoning it bit by bit. And today, too, emigration is still the dominant topic. All the people I meet have sisters in Israel, cousins in New York, aunts in Canada. Though they still live in Odessa, a part of them has already left. And anyone who thinks constantly - every day, Lena says - of what it would be like somewhere else, anyone who draws sustenance from the letters and parcels sent from that somewhere else, is already lost to his own city. Emigration has another aspect too. Those who move into the city, filling the vacant spaces (and positions in the queue), come from the Ukrainian provinces. "They are concerned only with the next moment," Lena says, not with anything beyond that, and they certainly have no concern for the city. They are interested in Odessa because they may find a job there. But was it any different in the past, I ask her later. Yes, it was, Lena says: in the past people came in order to add their own initiative, their own impetus, to the functioning of the city, to place themselves at its disposal. Those who come now simply expect that something or other will turn up, that someone will look after them. And this hope is deceptive, the disappointment is correspondingly great, and that makes people aggressive. Also these people no

longer have their roots in the kind of village life that might have given them a dignity, a sense of tradition and a spirit of rebellion to take with them on their way, so that they could at least create friction on contact with this city even if they won't open themselves to it. As it is, they merely inhabit it, do grubby deals on the black market, hang about outside the hotels that only take foreign currency, around the gambling casino, by the Steps, and make it unpleasant for you to walk in the streets. And, indeed, there is unfriendliness everywhere, at kiosks and in shops and restaurants, and where for the sake of Western currency this is coupled with false, fawning servility – this mixture is just as unpleasant. Six years ago the dominant trend was for exorbitantly-priced Western-style establishments, artificially imported into a socialist wilderness; alongside these there were (and still are) dark, dingy corner bars where the vodka flows; and only very gradually is one starting to find light, clear, airy, high-ceilinged cafés, spacious enough for discussion to range far and wide instead of going round in circles like the talk in people's kitchens, and with small tables on which one could make space for the newspapers, except that these too do not yet exist. Oh, Odessa, to get to know you one has to bring all the books along oneself.

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

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

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

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

Lena’s commentary on the museum ran counter to its own priorities, adding here, omitting there. Isaak Babel had been accorded only a meagre display cabinet, but Lena’s account of that room was devoted solely to him, disregarding all the others, and the same with Bagritzky, Ilf and Petrov. The heroes of socialist literature in their big glass cases seemed to shrivel up, growing smaller and smaller in the face of the literary truth catching up with them, overtaking them, banishing them to their corners. One small case contains Isaak Babel’s spectacles; when his wife brought them to the prison for him, the NKVD said to her: he won’t be needing those any more.

As we talk, the two of us probe ever deeper into the idea (not to say the soul) of Odessa. What – at least as reflected in the literature about it – is the essence of the city? According to Roshanna P. Sylvester, “In his 1913 guide to the city, Grigorii Moskvich wrote that the dream of the ‘essential Odessan’ was to strike it rich and immediately acquire a house, a carriage, and everything else he needed to ‘transform himself (by appearance, of course) into an impeccable British gentleman or blue-blooded Viennese aristocrat,” and that “Odessans are proud of themselves (not without foundation), flaunting their ability to dress as well as any purebred Parisian or Viennese.” Some places only become real cities when they acquire nicknames that refer to other cities: this was the case with Tel-Aviv, which some people in the 1920s called ‘Łódź-sur-Mer,’ while others said: “Tel-Aviv?

Jeszcze piękniejsze od Paryżu!” [Even more beautiful than Paris!] The mirror, no matter how pale or artificially gilded, still provides the right images. “The Odessan was obsessed with image,” Sylvester’s excellent article goes on, “while giving little regard to ‘spiritual development’ or ‘the inner content of public life,’” the writer complained.<sup>2</sup> They were “capricious,” “fickle,” preoccupied with fashion, interested only in profit, defined – Sylvester quotes Moskvich’s words once more – by “the passion for quick enrichment, the spirit of enterprise and a rare resourcefulness and shrewdness in business.”

“Obsessed with image” – this was, of course, meant to indicate the superficiality and preoccupation with externals of an urban culture that was spiritually and intellectually inferior to that of St Petersburg, Moscow, Kiev, Warsaw “or even Khar’kov.” Sylvester’s study of the popular press gives ample confirmation of that picture. But in one of the passages she quotes, which are, of course, intended as criticisms, there lurks an idea which may help us to understand why, despite all these negative judgements, memory preserved such a positive image of Odessa. One columnist complained that Odessa’s civil society was dominated by the “middle class *meshchanstvo*,” aspirants to what Jeffrey Brooks has called the “new” intelligentsia, people with “cultural pretensions” who “wanted their tastes to be recognized as legitimate [...], wanted to be included in the cultural life largely dominated by the old intelligentsia.”

Noting the growing ‘prosperity’ of a new middle class, these journalists felt that they had a pedagogic duty to foster the necessary ‘spiritual development’ to go with it. This was an honourable aim and it is, as I have said, well documented by Sylvester, with a wealth of examples. But here, inspired by no less an authority than Theodor Herzl and his defence of the petty bourgeoisie as the “yeast” of the city, I would like to speak up for “cultural pretensions.” The operative word is “wanted”: “people who wanted their tastes to be recognised.” To me this suggests intention, energy, ambition. What was about to be pedagogically taken in hand and improved was a kind of raw state, something unfinished, still in the making, expectant. Pretension, certainly, but also a kind of innocence. That civilising mission (which incidentally, with a strange parallelism, has reappeared today among those who seek to protect their image of Odessa from its current immigrants and their ignorance) aimed to overcome that innocence, and it cannot be criticised for that. But I would like to argue that that sense of innocence, of expectancy, of hope, has survived as an ‘Odessa feeling’ among those who emigrated.

The accusation of false pretension, an attitude of mind which according to Ahad Ha’am, for instance, was characteristic of the city’s Jews, was not unjustified. But perhaps it failed to recognise what energy, what potential

2 R. P. Sylvester, ‘Making an Appearance: Urban “Types” and the Creation of Respectability in Odessa’s Popular Press, 1912–1914’, *Slavic Review*, vol. 59 (Winter 2000), pp. 802–24, here p. 802.



lies in the apparent 'falseness.' Jewish Palestine, born in Odessa, was animated by similar notions of perfectibility, ideas about the 'new man.' History cunningly ensured that the experience of impatience, of starting afresh, of pretension, came in with the immigrants. And survived.

## VIRTUAL ODESSA

While preparing a small book that was published in November 1999 in connection with the *Jüdische Kulturtag* in Berlin, Thomas Lackmann and I began to search for the virtual Odessa on the Internet. Testing our findings by searching for other cities too, we discovered that for no other city in the former Soviet Union did the world wide web offer as many personal homepages, filled with nostalgia and longing, as for Odessa. Zhenya Rozinskiy has one such homepage - "I came to the United States of America in 1991. I was born in Odessa in 1973" - and so has Dima Fischer from Israel - "that's where I lived before: Odessa." What emerges from these many personal testimonies may be summed up as 'Odessity.'

What is Odessity? The accidental echo of the word 'city' provides the first clue. It refers to an urban quality: it means being part of an entity that is called Odessa and that exists somewhere - somewhere far away, and yet, whether you are called Boris Veytsman or Dima Fischer or Slava Spivak, you have taken a piece of it along with you: to Tel-Aviv - "am I the only Odessite here? Please mail!" - or to New York, to Berlin, to Sydney. It is special, it distinguishes you, it marks you out. Its very foreignness does that. Soon a gigantic dollar sign, all in red, may be erected in the centre of the city. The idea for it came from Los Angeles.

An *OdessaWeb Guest Book*, which runs to no fewer than 239 pages, gathers together messages from representatives of 'Odessity' all over the world. Here are some of them:

- We were impressed by the presentation of Odessa page. We are the former Odessa citizens, now living in Melbourne, would like to maintain contact *s odessitami*.

- I found the Odessa page in the internet. It is great. Thank you very much from all the Odessits abroad.

- A couple days ago I typed 'Odessa' just for fun in the Netscape's Netsearch and came across odessit.com site. This is really great that you have the pictures of our beautiful city there.

- As Odessit, I like your homepage very much, it appealed to me.

- You have a very cool homepage. I'm from Odessa as well!

- I've stumbled upon your web page, and wanted to thank you. What a tribute to my favorite city! Your Odessa page made me feel so nostalgic...

- I like your page very much and I'm proud of us, people from Odessa.

- This stuff is great. I feel at home!!! Thank you for this, and good luck!!! God bless Odessa!!! (I esli vru tak shab ya zdoh!)

- You actually warmed up hearts of many of us who left Odessa. For the rest of my ZEMLYAKI! Dear odessits, let's stay in touch and even reunite more often, we all share the same love to ODESSA. As they say "Bydte vu vse mne zdorovu!"

- I can't thank you enough for this little piece of home away from home. I now reside in Kansas City and miss Odessa too much.

- I loved the pictures. I suddenly felt a rush of nostalgia. We definitely used to live in one of the most beautiful cities in the world. Too bad we couldn't take it with us. But the memories are always with us.

- Finally there is a page to meet old friends and hear native language.

- Spasiba! It is so good to feel that your past is not so away and maybe not away at all.

- Greetings to surfers in Odessa from the Pearl of the Orient! [from Hong Kong]

- Oh boy! Let me hold my tears there. [...] I consider it being a gift to be from Odessa. And here you are as proud as I am. We have a lot in common (who knows maybe relatives or enemies at least).

- There is no one in the whole entire world like a true Odessit!

I am very glad that such site does exist, the site where you can become young again.

And so on, and on. "Too bad we couldn't take it with us!" Some people may ask, quite reasonably, what constitutes the "fascination of Odessa, which is so frequently invoked," and whether the image of the city - which in general, but particularly in Jewish contexts, is a surprisingly positive one - is perhaps less a direct reflection of its 19<sup>th</sup>-century reality than an "invention dating from the 1920s, created by emigré writers and publicists in Palestine." To my mind, however, the question has an unduly critical ring. Of course, 'Odessa' is an invention, an image, a longing - just like that 'certain Berlin' of the 1920s, the 'Paris *de lumière*,' or any other image of a city that has been remoulded in literature. The cultural historian is certainly interested in the 'reality'; I have the deepest respect for archives, and especially for the work of the wonderful Lilia Belausova in Odessa. But I also know that the realities reconstructed from archival sources, especially when they concern whole cities, are no less 'invented' than, say, the personal memories that are to be found in autobiographies, or than literary depictions by authors from Pushkin to Babel and Katayev and, indeed, up to the present day. I would even go so far as to say that these 'portraits' and 'images' of Odessa are more powerful as evidence and are, in a sense which merits discussion, more 'truthful' than particular (i.e. selected) and reconstructed (and therefore constructed) 'realities.' After all, Venice too is most itself when it conforms to the clichéd images and not when it presents itself as a 'normal' Italian city.

Is it time to speak of Berlin? During the guided tour with Igor Merkulenko, I talk about the Berlin phase. The women from Israel are astonished: surely at that time the Nazis were already on the rise? They know nothing of that Berlin of the early 1920s, of the flowering of Russian, Russian-Jewish culture there at the time of the great inflation. After the 1917 Revolution it was the exponents of an exiled Hebrew culture who first came to Berlin - among them Bialik, who founded his publishing house *Dwir* in this city - followed, some years later, by the Yiddish artists. This 'Charlottengrad' period has been well researched, and there is insufficient

space here for a detailed account of those years. Suffice it to say that, despite all the intervening upheavals, Odessa has become part of Berlin – just as it has become part of New York, where it is remembered in the 'Little Odessa' of Brooklyn's Brighton Beach.

### THE SPIRIT OF ODESSA

During our conversations at the Museum of Literature in Odessa, one name in particular cropped up again and again, that of Vladimir Ze'ev Jabotinsky. His novel *The Five* is at present unobtainable in either German or English. In it, five characters symbolise five traits in their author, five aspects of one man, five possible courses for one life. Lena told us about Jabotinsky's years in Odessa, I contributed what I knew about his political activity in Israel, and so the personal history of this man helped us to draw the two cities of Odessa and Tel-Aviv closer together.

Vladimir Ze'ev Jabotinsky, the journalist and newspaper essayist, was later to become the founder of the revisionist movement within Zionism. The contribution made by the Revisionists – who wanted to 'return' to the principles of the Basle Programme and the creation of a home for the Jews in the whole of Palestine, and were prepared to fight for that state – to the founding not only of Tel-Aviv but also of the state of Israel as a whole is a little-researched, unpopular topic: people are nowadays too quick to denounce Jabotinsky as the spiritual father of the 'terrorists' surrounding Menachem Begin, and so to consign him to oblivion. But the "brilliant journalist and lecturer," whose portrait Arthur Koestler has drawn, was an early advocate of an unsentimental view of urban development, an approach shorn of mythology and oriented towards the Western liberal model. "He was brought up," Koestler writes, "in the enlightened atmosphere of cosmopolitan Odessa, a stranger to Jewish tradition," and on the basis of that experience he opposed all those who wanted to build Tel-Aviv "as a kind of glorified ghetto, without the restrictions but with the traditions and atmosphere of the ghetto – and even the architecture of the ghetto, which the first colonists piously imitated."<sup>3</sup>

Jabotinsky tried to transfer the liberal spirit of Odessa to Tel-Aviv. On the occasion of the 1929 Levant Fair he wrote that the organisers of the event, "the group of young men who cluster around the *Moshav v-Tassi*," had, at an early stage, already believed in the possibility of industrial development in the Land. It was this belief that the fairs symbolised – in the design of their pavilions and kiosks, in their aggressive, outward-directed activity, in their high regard for trade because it alone could forge the necessary links and contacts to enable the country to take its place in the international network of commercial forces:

<sup>3</sup> Arthur Koestler, *Arrow in the Blue. An Autobiography* (London, Glasgow, 1952), pp. 106–107.

The army of Jewish merchants scattered all over the world are our natural comrades, it is they who hold in their hands the fate of Palestine's industry. We must not shut our eyes to the essential importance of this task. We have been influenced a little too much by the ringing rhetoric of what our friends in Germany call 'Umschichtung' [restructuring], a dream of creating a nation which should consist only of farmers and labourers without a single merchant among them. We took up cheap catchwords such as the merchant is only a 'superfluous intermediary', a sort of barrier between producer and consumer [...]. Trade is the basis of all economic progress, of all communal, national and social development. And up till now the world has invented no better instrument able to assume this stupendous task [...] than the individual merchant.<sup>4</sup>

Only a past spent in Odessa could give rise to statements of this kind.

After three hours we were all exhausted; we went into Lena's office and I recognised the eastern European office culture that I knew so well from Poland. A small room with three desks in it: it is only possible to do any work because all three occupants are never there at any one time, since one is always out shopping. Cigarettes are brought, ashtrays put out, tea made, the window steams up as the water boils, and on the window-sill sits a cat which has learned to take advantage of such opportunities. What would an office be without these moments when work is interrupted – or the true work begins. We talk, I tell them about Tel-Aviv, mention names, Jabotinsky, Dizengoff, Bialik, Ahad Ha'am; these names, which for me belong to texts and to streets in Tel-Aviv, now become linked to addresses in Odessa, and so I copy down from a list the houses that go with the names.

I gather together what I know. For its Jewish population Odessa was the *building-site of modernity*; here, it too could try out a new way of life, throwing off the baggage of tradition.

Nineteenth-century Russian Jews saw the city of Odessa as many things. In Yiddish folklore it came to be associated with a life of comfort and pleasure-seeking (*"Iebn vi Got in Odes"* [to live like God in Odessa]), with indifference to religion [...], with the criminal underworld [...]. The city, according to admirers and detractors alike, was different from all others, and though Vilna, it was said, could be best likened to Minsk, Mogilev to Vitebsk, and Ekaterinoslav to Elizavetgrad, no other city in Russia resembled Odessa. If Odessa could be compared at all, it was only to the port cities of America, and then only to those on the frontier, like Chicago or San Francisco, where a *mixture of enterprise, license, and violence combined to create environments free from the restraints of the past*.<sup>5</sup>

The building-site of modernity: as a city without a glorious past, a city "without a history," a trading city in which "the alleged preoccupation of its

<sup>4</sup> 'The Manufacturer and the Merchant'. Speech by Mr V. Jabotinsky at the Manufacturers' Conference, *Palestine and Near East Economic Magazine*. The IVth Palestine and Near East Exhibition and Fair. Festivities in Celebration of the 20th Anniversary of the Founding of Tel-Aviv (Tel-Aviv, Palestine, 7th–30th April, 1929), pp. 183–5.

<sup>5</sup> S. J. Zipperstein: *The Jews of Odessa. A Cultural History, 1794–1881* (Stanford, 1985), p.1 (my italics – J. S.).

residents, Jewish and non-Jewish alike, with moneymaking and the pleasures of the moment made it a place where the past was considered irrelevant or was overshadowed by the demands of the present,” and also as a largely secular city, Odessa, like Saloniki and Trieste, occupied (and still occupies) a controversial position in the historiography of Jewish culture. Odessa was the laboratory of a transformation to modernity, the outcome of which is today viewed with scepticism. But in its heyday the picture that the city presented (as, for similar reasons, Tel-Aviv, does today) was of an interaction between Jewish life and urban life characterised, if not by an absence of conflict, at any rate by productive tension.

An important factor here is freedom, or perhaps one should say an almost total lack of ties. Cities like Odessa, Trieste or Saloniki presented an international face to their visitors: it was as if these cities were to some extent detached from the national context to which they belonged, a context which in any case was often disputed, still undecided and thus, in a sense, open. “C’est encore l’Europe devant nos yeux,” a French visitor to Odessa is supposed to have exclaimed; “Odessa’s continental flavour” evoked comparison with Naples and Genoa, just as visitors to Tel-Aviv were always seeking to compare it with European cities.<sup>6</sup> Its status as a free port also gave Odessa a certain freedom vis-à-vis the state whose gateway to the sea it was, to such an extent that restrictive anti-Jewish laws applied far less rigorously here than in other Russian cities. Odessa came into being through immigration, and among the Jewish population too it was the most progressive groups that came to Odessa and modernised the city’s economic and cultural life – and themselves.

A building-site of modernity: its international character, probably together with its ‘newness,’ its lack of history, meant that the city was perceived as a city, it was all city, had no wish to be anything else, did not disguise its nature. Its border location, the ascendancy of trade and culture over physical drudgery and tradition, that openness towards the outside world on which its very existence depended – all this provided the ideal setting for the gradual emergence and development of a modern Jewish community. “Jews here had achieved a level of public-spiritedness and cultivation” unparalleled elsewhere, wrote Joachim Tarnopol – for many years the rabbi of that community – about Odessa. The city, he said, was an example of “what Jewish enterprise and resolve can achieve when unfettered by counterproductive restraints.” Of course, as early as the 1830s, again in 1881 and yet again in 1903 Odessa experienced not merely “restraints” but terrible pogroms. But the memory of the history before (and after) the pogroms lived on.

<sup>6</sup> Such metaphorical language sometimes takes odd forms, even today: “*Levantinische Lebensart und Weltoffenheit prägten lange Zeit die russische Stadt am Schwarzen Meer* [For a long time a *Levantine way of life* and openness to the outside world were the hallmarks of the Russian city on the Black Sea],” states an article in the magazine *GEO* in 1982, where Odessa is also described as “eine polyglotte, *fast mediterrane* Stadt [a polyglot, almost *Mediterranean* city].” G. Feiffer, ‘Odessa nimmt sich seine Freiheit,’ *GEO* 4/1982, pp. 98–122.

The same images recur, and they evoke particular urban qualities (and urban passions) which have proved to be central to the general discourse about 'Jews and the city.'

Its location on the Black Sea made it [Odessa] a kind of commercial and cultural interface between the Russian Empire and the outside world. Its population came to include an extraordinary mix of ethnic, cultural, and religious communities – Ukrainian, Russian, Greek, Jewish, Western-European, and Asian. For this reason too, its history intersects with the history of many peoples, within and outside the Russian Empire. For example, a large part of the American-Jewish community traces its immediate, Old World origins to Odessa and its environs.<sup>7</sup>

In the conversations I had with Lena and her photographer husband Grigorii, Israel seemed a very distant country. The photographer says that there is no photography in Israel. The letters from those who have migrated there tell only of a place that is alien. A major element in the picture, in the mental image which these people have of Israel, is that it is far removed from traditional, genuine Jewishness. They believe that true Jewishness, with its language, its culture, its artistic achievements is at home here in Odessa and perhaps also in Kiev, Moscow, Warsaw or Vilna, but not in New York and certainly not in Jerusalem or Tel-Aviv. This is also the view of Aleksander Beyderman, who is sitting in the photographer's room and is introduced to me as "the last Yiddish poet in Odessa." My astonishment probably shows, for Mr Beyderman looks young to be a last poet and is, in fact, even younger than he looks, having been born only in 1949, a journalist writing in Russian and a poet in Yiddish. He has been writing Yiddish poetry only for a few years, apparently in the spirit of "well, somebody has to." He speaks a sentence in Hebrew, with the Ashkenazy accent which places the stress on the first syllable of words, whereas in Israel the stress falls on the last syllable, in the Sephardic manner. Later he will tell me that in Israel "they' don't speak proper Hebrew." I tell them about Tel-Aviv, they tell me about Odessa, and gradually we join up the threads that link the two, as we unearth a history which for seventy years was a taboo subject here, a topic surrounded by fear, while in Tel-Aviv it was lost from sight because there it is only one history among many and because many young Israelis know nothing of the old city. But what would Odessa be without the longing for Tel-Aviv, and what would Tel-Aviv be without this city that foreshadowed it? And yet each knows nothing of the other. To Tel-Aviv, Odessa is no more than a memory, and to Odessa Tel-Aviv is a distant dream.

The threads which once held together the cities of Europe have been cut. A road junction: here, in a dilapidated house barely supported by long wooden poles, Jabotinsky lived. At 17 he was already writing for *Odessa Novosti*; in 1903 he reported on the pogroms in Kishinev. Across the road lived Dizengoff, the future mayor of Tel-Aviv. Both were among the organ-

<sup>7</sup> P. Herlihy: *Odessa. A History, 1794–1914* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard College, 1986), p. vii.

izers of a Jewish self-defence group which in 1905 was able to prevent the pogroms from spreading to the district of Moldavanka in Odessa. Both men were changed by the terrible news of the pogroms, and for both of them the founding of the Jewish self-defence organization was the first step of a journey that was to take them away from here, to somewhere new. In a small street: "Here modern Israel was born." The two women look at Mr Merkulenko very dubiously. But here, at number 12, lived Leon Pinsker, author of the pamphlet published in Berlin, and in German, entitled *Auto-Emancipation*. Pinsker, a doctor, joined the Hovevei Zion [Lovers of Zion], held meetings here, and from here, in 1882, sent the first group of *Biluim* on their way to Palestine – the pioneers of the future state.

In the same building the Odessa Committee met, first under Moshe Leib Lilienblum, then under Menachem Ussishkin, and all the money that was collected in the blue-and-white cups and tins for the Keren Kayemet L'Israel [Jewish National Fund], was brought here. This was the headquarters of the land purchasing company *Geula*, for which Dizengoff worked. Here those who were to travel on the *Ruslan* from Odessa to Jaffa in 1919 met together – 600 intellectuals, artists and politicians. Originally designed to carry 60 passengers, the *Ruslan* had 11 times that number on board, among them a fair number of men and women who were destined to make their mark on the fledgling Yishuv: poets, architects, painters, choreographers, journalists – Rahel, Yonatan Ratosh, Baruch Agadati, Arieh Navon, Ze'ev Rechter and others. Its docking in Jaffa a month later signified, to all intents and purposes, the commencement of the third aliyah. With a Jewish population of less than 60,000 at the time, the *Ruslan* had transported to Palestine one percent of the Yishuv. One of the main characters in Dan Tsalka's novel *A Thousand Hearts*, which describes that journey, is the architect Ezra Marinsky, "on his way to Tel-Aviv to build the new Israeli city." "In his mind's eye, he can already see the Mediterranean city that is to rise from the sands." It is expressions like this, documenting a vision, that link the two cities together.

Transnationality is a phenomenon in which historiography is showing an increasing interest. In a recent article Rebecca Golbert has shown how young people from a Ukrainian-Jewish background manage to live across borders, as it were. In the present paper we have been trying to locate Odessa – in Odessa itself, in Berlin, Tel-Aviv and New York, and we have come across many 'little Odessas' scattered all over the planet. But Golbert finds something else: "As typical of mixed borderland identities, elements of Jewishness, Ukrainianness, Russianness, Sovietness, Israeliness, and transnationalism are interwoven in the discourses of Ukrainian youth."<sup>8</sup> There are people who have stayed in Odessa. There are people who have

8 R. Golbert: 'Transnational orientations from home: constructions of Israel and transnational space among Ukrainian Jewish youth', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, vol. 27, no. 4 (October 2001), pp. 713–31; here p. 715.

emigrated to Israel (or the USA, or Germany, or any other country) and have stayed there, keeping contact with their friends and families back home. There are also people who, following emigration and a variety of experiences, have returned – home? One of the individuals interviewed by Golbert said:

On the one hand, I want to live in Israel; on the other hand, I want to live in Canada or in Australia; on the third hand I want to live in Moscow, fourth in Kiev; that is, I want everything ... But in principle, of course, it would be really great if here ... I don't know, if it were a more or less European country, Ukraine.<sup>9</sup>

The process of emigration starts with the imagining of 'something' else out there: another place where life will be better. It often ends with the experience of nostalgic longing for the place you came from. But between these two extremes lies a whole range of feelings and experiences that combine places and mental images. There is already a kind of Israel in Kiev or Odessa, and there is, as we have seen, so much of Odessa or Kiev in so many other places. For all of those, wherever they live, who have started to imagine, there is a sense of already being on their way. Perhaps this is what the new research in migration calls 'transnationalism.' There are examples of language use involving combinations of Russian, Ukrainian, Yiddish, Hebrew, English and German; there are other elements of everyday life, such as clothing or music, which can be 'read' as signs of a transnational mode of behaviour that transcends locality. Perhaps our task is simply to identify the signals that ring, or say, or feel like Odessa.

<sup>9</sup> Golbert: 'Transnational orientations from home', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 0p. 716.