City of Rogues and Schnorrers

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RUSSIA'S JEWS AND THE MYTH OF OLD ODESSA

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For Allie, Sarah, and Max

"Your father," he once said to me, "was one of your real wild Jews. A *bonditt*. A *mazik*. A devil. I could have sworn he was out of Odessa."

—MORDECAI RICHLER, *Barney's Version*

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NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

For Russian transliteration, I have adopted the Library of Congress System. For a handful of personal names known to English readers, I have used the more familiar spelling (such as Isaac Babel instead of Isaak Babel'). For transliterating Yiddish, I have used the YIVO system. In the case of individuals and terminology that are rendered differently in Russian, Yiddish, Hebrew, and English, I have used the most common spelling, in the interest of clarity and consistency.

City of Rogues and Schnorrers

INTRODUCTION *Why Is This Town Different from All the Rest?*

DURING THE CHAOS of the Russian Revolution and civil war, Konstantin Paustovskii witnessed a curious and somewhat comical incident. Observing a street-corner queue in Odessa, Paustovskii noted the presence of

> a short, old, Jewish gentleman in a dusty bowler and a worn black coat reaching to his ankles. Smiling and nodding benevolently, he observed the queue through unusually thick spectacles. Now and then he took out of his pocket a small black book with the Star of David embroidered in gold on the cover, read a page or two and returned the book to his pocket.

Paustovskii was certain that he must have been "a scholar, perhaps even a *tsaddic,* an old philosopher from Portofrank Street," a figure not uncommon in early-twentieth-century Ukraine. Suddenly, a young rather insolent-looking man appeared wearing a black skullcap and canary-colored leather shoes. "The young man," Paustovskii continues,

> was wondering how to jump the queue without causing a fuss and a row. He saw the old gentleman with the book, and naturally took him for the very embodiment of mildness and non-resistance to evil. Making up his mind, he skillfully inserted his shoulder between him and his neighbour in the queue and, pushing the old man, muttered casually:
>
> "Excuse me."
>
> Still with the same smile, the old man bent his sharp little elbow, drew it back, took aim and, dealing the young man a swift and forceful blow in the chest, right under the heart, said politely:
>
> "Not at all. Excuse *me.*"
>
> The young man grunted and flew back, hitting an acacia tree. His cap fell off his head. He picked it up and walked away without looking back. Only at the corner did he turn and shake his fist at the old man, whimpering,
>
> "Jailbird! Bandit!" . . .
>
> The old man took his book out of his pocket and immersed himself in it, evidently searching for some kernel of truth which he would later discuss with his cronies in the quiet of Portofrank Street.

Paustovskii recounts this incident in his memoirs with neither shock nor disbelief, even though, in an era noted for its anti-Semitism and violent pogroms, a pious

Jew forcefully defending himself against a hooligan was hardly a common sight. Paustovskii's tone suggests otherwise, intimating that a Jew who is at once pious and pugilistic is not implausible—an unlikely, droll occurrence perhaps, but not an impossibility, at least not in Odessa, in any event.[1]

Odessa is a city with an infamous reputation. It has at times evoked rapture, wonder, laughter, and revulsion, but it has never evoked indifference. It has been depicted as a fantastic realm, a fabled land of gold, abundance, and sin, where the unlikely seems natural and the implausible is expected to happen. Odessa's history is encased in legends of its imagined gilded and wicked past, a body of lore that has been compiled, enriched, embellished, and passed down for more than two centuries. Old Odessa is Russia's Great Southern Babylon, and successive generations of mythmakers have commemorated it in literature, film, humor, and song.

The myth of old Odessa is the tale of a frontier seaport boomtown on the Black Sea whose commercial prosperity, lax legislation, and balmy southern climate attracted legions of adventurers seeking easy wealth and earthly pleasures throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As a hub for contraband, prostitutes, and other commodities of sin, the multiethnic settlers of old Odessa were both entrepreneurial and dissolute, lining their pockets with ill-begotten riches and then emptying them in their pursuit of iniquity. Much like Shanghai, New Orleans, and San Francisco's Barbary Coast, old Odessa was both venerated and vilified as a city of sin—heaven for some, hell on earth for others—a haven for smugglers, thieves, and pimps who boasted of their corruption through endless nights of raucous revelry. But old Odessa is unique among cities of sin, for old Odessa was also a "Judeo-kleptocracy," a city overrun and governed by Jewish gangsters and swindlers. Odessa's rebellious Jews pursued dreams of opulence and immoderation, exhibiting a passion uninhibited by the weight of a traditional culture rooted in nonviolence and moral rectitude. Old Odessa was the Russian Jew's golden calf—gilded, wicked, and ostentatious in its intemperance.

Old Odessa was thus mythologized as a Jewish city of sin, but the city's unique Jewishness does not end with its crime and debauchery, as Odessa is also depicted as a land of wit and irony, where thieves and lowlifes induced laughter through their crooked and dissolute behavior. Odessa's Jewish criminals are notoriously funny, but it is a brand of humor that was not native to Odessa, having been brought to the city from the Yiddish-speaking shtetls of Eastern Europe. Along with the Jews themselves, Jewish humor found a new home in Odessa, where it quickly became the dominant mode for articulating the myth of old Odessa—the celebration of a pleasure-drenched seaside frontier town whose inhabitants were ironically proud of their chiseling and giddy merrymaking.

With the Revolution of 1917 Odessans migrated to Moscow and the interior, and disseminated the Odessa myth throughout the USSR using literature, comedy,

and music. More than anyone else, Isaac Babel popularized the image of Odessa as a city of swashbuckling Jewish swindlers and sinners, who all at once embodied the physical strength, revelry, and wit for which Odessa was famous. The larger-than-life Jewish gangster emerged as the prevailing icon of Odessa in Soviet culture, and he was depicted in stark contrast to the stereotypically passive shtetl Jew of Eastern Europe who was steeped in tradition and victimized in an endless cycle of bloody pogroms. Despite frequent attacks by the Soviet government for its frivolity, its celebration of criminals through folksongs and anecdotes, and its Jewish roots, the Odessa myth survived the twentieth century and continues to flourish today.

This book traces the rich and multifaceted history of the Odessa myth from its eighteenth-century origins until the twenty-first century. Although there have been several excellent monographs on Odessa's history and culture, this is the first comprehensive examination of Odessa from the perspective of its "myth," an improbable fusion of criminality, Jewishness, and humor.[2] No other place in tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union was seen as so inseparably impish and Jewish; no other prominent Jewish community in the modern world was considered as sardonic and brazen in its dissipation. Such an amalgamation of attributes ensured Odessa an enduring infamy, much to the delight of its admirers, and much to the horror of its opponents, for an unconstrained enclave of Jewish rogues and merrymakers was both alluring and inherently dangerous. Old Odessa challenged Jewish tradition no less than it challenged the tsarist state, exemplifying the limitless heretical possibilities of a disorderly frontier town. It later confounded Soviet communism by mocking the Revolution's gravity and the transformative project of building socialism. Old Odessa was a threat because it empowered the Jew *through* his trickery and his irreverence. The city's inhabitants refused to take themselves seriously, and their lack of solemnity was key to the survival of their culture, identity, and collective memory.

Old Odessa as "Myth"

Old Odessa is myth, the folklore of a secular age, rooted in fantastic imagery of heroes, outlaws, and enchanted cityscapes, ranging from the idyllic to the apocalyptic.[3] Myth, however, need not imply falsehood (and hence fiction), and should not be viewed as a category separate and distinct from reality (and hence empirical history). History and myth are not fundamentally at odds with each other; their relationship is complex and fluid, a bond that Bo Strath likens to "a Venn diagram of two overlapping discourses," linked by the narrative technique employed to order and connect disparate events, people, and places.[4] And it is a relationship that is far from obvious. Many of the self-professed fictional tales written about old Odessa depict Jewish gangsters who actually lived, debaucherous festivities that actually took place, and humorous words that were actually

spoken. Conversely, many accounts that purport to be historical contain an obvious element of invention, involving fabricated dialogue, the conflation of discrete events, and the appropriation of folkloric motifs that developed in other times and other places, far removed from the city's social and political context. But there is a striking parallel in how narrative in both these genres is constructed, the *way* the story is told, the language that is used, the discursive blueprint that governs every tale of old Odessa. It is not so much a question of whether or not what is being described really took place; a particular tale is part of the myth of old Odessa because of the rhythm, intonation, language, and themes that are deployed in the act of narration.

Nor is it a question of belief and sincerity versus conscious appropriation and invention on the part of the mythmaker. Odessa's mythmakers are a heterogeneous cohort, made up of writers, musicians, comedians, and many other actors who have each played a different role in the myth's creation, reproduction, embellishment, dissemination, and reception. Some of these actors have consciously engaged in inventive mythmaking, craftily seeking to inscribe their stories and their own lives into Odessan lore. Others, however, have unconsciously reproduced the themes, language, and humor that define the myth of old Odessa without giving much thought to authenticity versus fiction. But all these actors have played a similar role in the mythmaking process, insofar as they continue to use the language and folkloric motifs that have governed the myth of old Odessa since it first coalesced in the nineteenth century.

It would be presumptuous and naïve of me to suggest that my own analysis is somehow objective and located outside the realm of the Odessa myth. My imagination was initially piqued through Isaac Babel's exotic Jewish gangsters and Sholem Aleichem's fantasies of Russia's Eldorado. I spent hours wandering the streets of Odessa, wondering where old Odessa was, whether it had ever existed at all. I embraced every sign and every clue that spoke of old Odessa and undoubtedly rejected many of the city's aspects that did not fit my vision. Nevertheless, I have tried to provide a sober assessment of how such a myth—certainly unique in Imperial Russia and the USSR, and perhaps unique in the world—could and did develop. And I have sought to provide sufficient context for each era to explain why mythmakers may have constructed *their* old Odessa in their particular fashion, using specific imagery, language, and tone.

Old Odessa and its colorful characters have appeared in memoirs, music, jokes, novels, films, newspapers, dictionaries, guidebooks, and histories. Each instance of these sources is a distinct mythological artifact, yet similar to every other such artifact because of its capacity to encapsulate the myth's spirit. A three-sentence anecdote, a stanza or melody from a two-minute criminal folksong, or the combination of words in a newspaper headline was often rich enough to symboli-

cally represent the Odessa myth in its totality. As the Soviet era progressed the act of mythmaking became more sophisticated, and the myth's articulation took place with greater brevity and implicitness. Such subtlety allowed the myth of old Odessa to survive the assault wrought by the ideologues of proletarian culture, which lasted from the Stalin era until the collapse of Soviet socialism.

The Myth of the City

Mythmaking is a practice that has flourished in the modern secular world, and the stories produced by mythmakers are critical for understanding the histories, ideals, and identities of modern secular societies. Mythology is at the core of nations, cities, and any sort of imagined community unified through ideology, shared rituals, or collective memory.[5] Dissecting the myth of old Odessa by tracing its evolution from the time of Catherine the Great through the Soviet era and then into the twenty-first century is an important and necessary approach for understanding Odessa's past, present, and perhaps its future. But exploring the myth has value that goes beyond the quest to know the history and culture of one particular city. Knowing the Odessa myth in all its facets enriches our perspective on how we view "the city" as a cultural phenomenon in its own right.

Cities, by their very nature, lend themselves to the enterprise of mythmaking. Even the smallest cities are by definition big, insofar as one resident can never know every individual, every street, and every building that constitute his city. Anselm Strauss maintains that "the city, as a whole, is inaccessible to the imagination unless it can be reduced and simplified."[6] The imagined city is therefore limited in scope, often characterized by one or more specific symbols that implicitly come to represent the city as a whole. Even cities with a multitude of symbols coming in a variety of forms—neighborhoods, street corners, markets, monuments, clock towers, annual events—must ultimately be finite in number; the six-hundred-page guidebook must also simplify the city into a coherent narrative, omitting all that its author deems unnecessary or unworthy for inclusion. The inhabitant, the visitor, and the observer of the city all participate in this process of reduction as well, by infusing their necessarily limited urban experiences with specific meanings, even preconceiving a vision of the city that will shape their subsequent physical encounters with it. "The city that we seek," write William Sharpe and Leonard Wallock, "conditions the city that we will find."[7]

The myths of cities tend to combine two opposing sets of images—the city as paradise and the city as nightmare. Utopia and dystopia often coexist in the same representations of a particular city, and one can find this in depictions of many modern cities. But this duality is not a modern phenomenon: it has its roots in the ancient world. Peter Preston and Paul Simpson-Housely suggest that the city has always appeared as the "physical embodiment of the Utopian community,"

an orderly and ultimately perfectible realm segregated from the chaos and violent forces that exist beyond its surrounding walls. However, they continue, the city has, since ancient times, been depicted "as the site of guile, corruption, intrigue and false values, as against the positive, natural, straightforward values of the countryside."[8] The connection between modern representations of cities and antiquity is further underscored by what Sharpe and Wallock call "ruling metaphors":

> as it symbolized human faith and aspirations, the contemporary metropolis took on aspects of the Heavenly City, the New Jerusalem; as it embodied the failure of these hopes, it partook of the depravity of Babylon or Sodom; its smoke, industry, and avarice suggested the Infernal City of Dante; and its confusion, noise, and lack of direction or community likened it to Babel, the original urban chaos.[9]

Mythical cities have their origins in biblical theology and post-biblical folklore; this legacy affects the way we view the cities of our own times.

There are many wicked cities in the Bible, including Sodom, Gomorrah, and Nineveh; they endure the bitter harangues of the prophets and are ultimately consumed by the fires of God's apocalyptic anger.[10] But the emblematic city of sin is Babylon, the great commercial and cultural center of the ancient Middle East, whose gilded streets harbored sexual transgression and material excess. According to Wolf Schneider, Babylon embodied "everything that constitutes the attractiveness and the danger of giant cities: culture and depravity, arrogance and money, temples of faith and those of hectic amusement, splendour and misery."[11] The Book of Revelation brands Babylon "the mother of harlots and abominations of the earth," a city that "made all nations drink of the wine of the wrath of her fornication."[12] Such nefariousness could only lead to decimation, according to the Prophet Isaiah, who declares that "Babylon, the glory of kingdoms, the beauty of the Chaldees' excellency, shall be as when God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah."[13] The Bible's most gilded city is also its most wicked, with opulence and debauchery forming an inseparable bond that foretells the city's fated downfall.

Modernity inherited the Bible's template for understanding the city, a blueprint to mediate one's encounters with an imagined world at once divine and gilded yet fiendishly dissipated. Mythmakers of modern cities are working within this dualistic framework; they have access to a rich arsenal of terminology for defining their subjects, and they borrow from these ancient idioms and ideas—intentionally at times but often not—in constructing their visions of earthly paradise and urban jungles. But it is clear that certain types of cities lend themselves to such dichotomous representations more easily than others. Among those most commonly associated with paradise and hell, Eldorado for some but Gomorrah for others, are seaports, particularly those on the geographic frontier of large states or empires.

Alien and mysterious, cities such as San Francisco, New Orleans, Shanghai, and Odessa have become legendary for both their allure and their depravity.

Although such modern cities of sin have distinct histories, ethnic compositions, and cultures, they share certain socioeconomic and political attributes that help explain why they have been depicted as latter-day Babylons. Many of these cities experienced frenetic commercial and demographic growth during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, usually because of a widespread perception that they suddenly had something to offer, something that could enrich those who settled there. San Francisco's development was the product of the Gold Rush of 1849;[14] at the very same moment, European imperialism transformed Shanghai into the Far East's commercial center for opium and Asia's other reputed riches;[15] New Orleans served as an important hub for the slave trade and, during Prohibition, a smuggling point for liquor from the Caribbean;[16] and nineteenth-century Odessa became the center of Russia's lucrative grain trade and the frigid empire's gateway to the lush Mediterranean world. All these cities were perceived as boomtowns, where wealth could be easily acquired, often through activities deemed illicit or immoral.

Modern cities of sin tend to be port cities, with easy access to the sea and to inland trade routes. They are conduits (and sites of consumption) of diverse commodities, illegal or otherwise. The perpetual movement of goods from faraway places through these cities gives them an atmosphere of exoticness and abundance. These cities are often frontier towns, existing on the edge of urbanized society, where undergovernment abets a feeling of freedom, chaos, and danger. It is not surprising that many of them are on the American continent and developed their notorious reputations during their early histories, when they were geographically outposts of the civilization their settlers left behind.[17] Although Shanghai is a much older city with a different historical trajectory, the Opium Wars and the Treaty of Nanjing made it into a frontier town of sorts, dividing it into three separate jurisdictions, controlled by three different regimes.[18] Multiple governments may be viewed as a form of undergovernment, as both facilitate the proliferation of crime, vice, and disorder.

Another important factor is the sociological character of these cities. Seaports are, by their nature, cosmopolitan cities, attracting an ethnically diverse population, settlers and merchants who often arrive as transients seeking to take advantage of opportunities in trade. As a commercial entrepôt, the port city is a city in demographic flux, swarming with a seemingly rootless populace. They are lands of migrants who add to the cities' reputations as diverse and foreign, and therefore exotic. Port cities and frontier towns also tend to attract a particular type of person—young, single, searching for adventure, wealth, and pleasure, someone who believes that infinite riches exist in his imagined Eldorado. And although it is far too simplistic to draw a direct line between demography and the proliferation of

vice and crime, there is undoubtedly a connection, and, perhaps more significant, observers perceive a connection. The merchant and the transient are frequently defined as criminal, and the criminal of the seaport is imagined as the merchant of contraband, the pirate in the bay who is romanticized, feared, and condemned for his depravity.[19]

Finally, mythmakers are often complicit in manipulating the image of a city to achieve certain ends. This was particularly true in nineteenth-century America when urban "boosters" competed with one another in selling their cities (and disparaging neighboring ones) in order to encourage settlement.[20] But boosters often marketed their cities as Gomorrah as much as Arcadia. During the post–Civil War recession, boosters in New Orleans exploited the city's reputation for decadence and vice, promoting it as the "Great Southern Babylon" to ensure that seekers of revelry would continue to come and keep its faltering economy alive.[21] Like their counterparts in America, Odessa's proponents harnessed the city's dualistic reputation as heaven and hell. With sensational fanfare they flaunted Odessa as Russia's golden calf: lurid, mesmerizing, and irresistible.

Myth and reality reinforced each other in these imagined cities of gold and sin. Migrants and visitors entered such cities *expecting* to find certain things, things that undoubtedly existed, even if they were not representative of the city's totality. Mythmakers portrayed the city as decadently opulent, exoticized its cosmopolitanism and abundant goods, condemned *and* celebrated its deviance. The seaport has lent itself to such mythmaking, as it was easy to find both Nirvana and Gomorrah within its walls. Paradise and sin were two sides of the same coin, part of a tradition inherited from ancient representations of the city.

Jewish Criminality

The archetypal city of gold and sin is imagined as the playground of the rapacious, the godless, and the criminal. In old Odessa's case, the dissolute criminal inhabitants were largely Jewish. Jew and criminal, in fact, became synonymous for Odessa's mythmakers, and in representations of the city, the one almost always implies the other. But the idea of the Jewish criminal and the attributes he allegedly embodies were not inventions of Odessa's mythmakers. Jewish criminality has a long genealogy in European culture—both Christian and Jewish—and when it surfaced in Odessa during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the city's myth inherited this legacy.

Historians of Europe and America have demonstrated the involvement of Jews—often disproportionate to their numbers—in particular types of crime, especially nonviolent offenses such as theft, trade in stolen goods, counterfeiting, and swindling.[22] This should not be surprising, given the historical prominence of Jews in commerce, peddling, and other financial industries. Europe's Jews were mobile,

often relocating to new lands because of persecution in old ones but also to pursue fresh economic opportunities. Transnational connections and multilingualism gave the Jews additional advantages for commerce, legitimate or otherwise. Medieval European Jewry also played a fundamental role in money lending, engaging in this profession for both theological and practical reasons.[23] The Bible proscribes the lending of money at interest to one's "brother" but not to the "stranger," and this principle guided both state and church for much of the middle ages. With money lending deemed sinful, Christians were compelled (under tight Church regulation) to borrow from Jews, and the Jews often had the capital to lend to them.[24] Other occupations, moreover, were closed off to Jews in many European states, including land cultivation and handicrafts, thereby rendering money lending one of the few viable professions open to them.[25] Although money lending was a legal and necessary business, Christianity's negative attitude toward it criminalized the Jews who practiced it, discursively relegating them to the company of murderers, thieves, and highwaymen.[26]

The image of the Jew as villain thus had a socioeconomic basis, but it was markedly intensified by medieval Europe's interpretation of Scripture, with the New Testament providing "evidence" of the Jew's avarice and thirst for blood.[27] The biblical Jew and his descendants were branded the killers of Christ, deicides in league with the devil who crucified God for their selfish ends. Judas, the original betrayer of Christ, embodied and personified the guilt of all the Jews, having sent Jesus to his death for "thirty silver coins."[28] Accordingly, the Jews relinquished their standing as God's chosen people and were consigned to the category of the eternally accursed, sentenced to wander the earth as vagabonds, thieves, and practitioners of black magic. Medieval Europe viewed the Jews through this biblical lens, further compounding the convoluted relationship between socioeconomic realities and the myth of diabolical Jewish rapacity.

Depictions of Jewish thieves in European literature reveal the enduring influence of medieval theology in the modern era. In the English theater, the avaricious money-lending Jew became a "dramatic cliché," appearing, according to one scholar, in more than sixty plays between 1553 and the outbreak of the English civil war in the 1640s.[29] Shakespeare's Shylock was the most infamous fictional Jewish usurer, and he became the archetypal Jewish villain of the Elizabethan era and beyond.[30] Perhaps the most notorious Jewish criminal in modern European literature is Fagin, the leader of a thieves' den in Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist.* Although the novel is set in nineteenth-century London, Fagin's hideous appearance and his sordid escapades are rooted in the medieval conception of the Jew. Fagin is compared to "some loathsome reptile, engendered in the slime and darkness through which he moved," whose "toothless gums" contained "a few such fangs as should have been a dog's or a rat's."[31] Fagin personifies the proverbial

Jew's treachery, greed, and connections to both underworlds, the criminal dens of London and the unholy fires of hell.[32]

Other observers, particularly in German lands, contended that criminality was inherent in the language of the Jews. Martin Luther insisted that the Hebrew alphabet was a hidden code for criminals to exchange messages and that crime was the natural expression of the Jewish spirit.[33] Luther published what was probably the first criminal slang (*Gaunersprache*) dictionary to prominently feature words of Hebraic and Yiddish origin.[34] More dictionaries would follow in later centuries, with their authors presenting them as "scientific" evidence that the Jew and the thief were one and the same.[35] Most striking in these volumes is the extent to which commonplace expressions are incorporated, words and phrases that have no obvious relationship with depravity and misconduct.[36] These writers deployed the dictionary to demonstrate the Jew's criminality, another window into the lives of those who were socially and spiritually outside Christian society.[37]

The relationship between the activities of European Jewish criminals and the representations of their misdeeds is complex, varying significantly according to time and place. Jews were disproportionately usurers and traders who operated (legally or otherwise) on the margins of European society for much of the medieval and early modern eras. They were "greedy," "deviant," and "in league with the devil," insofar as medieval Christianity was the prism through which the Jew was defined. It was as if "criminality within the Jewish community was coterminous with the entire Jewish community," writes Todd Endelman in his study on eighteenth-century English Jewry.[38] Much of this imagery found its way into the myth of old Odessa, a city with a large Jewish population whom observers branded as inherently criminal.

Tough Jews

Christian theology, however, was not the only lens through which Jewish criminality was refracted and understood. Other prevalent stereotypes played a significant role in mediating these images, particularly the belief that Jews were physically weak and passive, ensconced in a universe of scholarship and prayer, and incapable of inflicting violence upon others. Jewish frailty, femininity, and submissiveness are commonplace in depictions of European Jewry, in images produced by Jews and Gentiles alike.[39] Such images were the product of the way in which the longue durée of Jewish history was interpreted: centuries of persecution characterized by repeated expulsions and massacres.[40]

Beginning in the nineteenth century, many Jewish intellectuals became convinced that physical frailty was the consequence of political vulnerability; the Jews were a stateless people, and with the final destruction of Israel in Roman times, the robust Jewish heroes of antiquity—Samson, Judah Maccabee, Bar Kokhbah—

had vanished and were replaced by the suffering Talmudic scholar, whose sickly body reflected his unhealthy diasporic condition.[41] Zionism germinated from this belief, and the movement's yearning to negate the diaspora through nation building also meant the transformation of the frail Jew into the modern muscle-bound Hebrew.[42]

But Zionism did not have a monopoly on the intellectual transformation of the Jewish weakling into the hardy pugilist. Almost concurrently, the Jewish thief was reconstructed to fit the image of a tough Jew, a robust and resilient bandit who used his physical power to achieve criminal ends. The Jewish criminal's corporeal makeover began in the Russian Empire, with Aleksandr Kuprin's fictional story "The Coward" ("Trus"), published in Russian in 1902. Kuprin describes his hero, Faibish, as a "brave and enterprising smuggler" who was

> famous—even far beyond the borders of the area—for his extraordinary physical strength, which assumed, in the passionate minds of the local youth exaggerated biblical proportions. Proposers of toasts at weddings inevitably compared him to Samson, that shatterer of buildings.[43]

The Jewish criminal ceased to be sick and cowardly; he could gain power though muscle rather than trickery and financial exploitation.[44]

Tough Jews and Jewish thieves began to appear in literature with greater frequency in the early twentieth century, first in Yiddish short stories and novels, and then in the works of Jewish writers in New York and Odessa—two emerging communities populated by émigrés from the shtetls of Eastern Europe. In "Kola Street," Sholem Asch depicts a neighborhood of Jewish thugs in Poland who are held in contempt by the rest of the community, derided as "illiterates, butchers, fishmongers . . . savages with no manners at all."[45] In Asch's novel *Mottke, the Thief,* the protagonist is chased out of his shtetl for his repeated misdeeds, fleeing to Warsaw where he becomes a prosperous pimp.[46] Joseph Opatoshu's *Romance of a Horse Thief* chronicles the escapades of a multigenerational Jewish family that supports itself through crime out of dire necessity but otherwise aspires for communal acceptance.[47] These writers claimed to portray the shtetl "as it really was," complete with delinquents and thugs who did not fit the traditional Jewish stereotype of suffering and scholarship.

Such Jewish criminals, however, are often admired and sought after for their raw physical power. Opatoshu's hero, Zanvl, may be a horse thief, but his brawny physique exerts a magnetic force over his fiancée and wins his sister numerous suitors, who see a familial relationship with Zanvl as a way to empower themselves. In "Kola Street," the shtetl's submissive intellectuals recognize the vital role the ruffians play in communal life, physically protecting them from the frequent pillaging of soldiers and Gentile hooligans. The tough Jewish thief is often revered, because

his physical strength and affinity for violence place him outside the boundaries of normative Jewish life; he transcends the prison of exile.

But reverence for the Jewish thief is not merely the product of his physical strength: the Jewish gangster is frequently venerated as a *Jewish* hero, as a defender of the Jewish community who uses his muscle to battle anti-Semites as often as he uses it to commit crime. In a fictional account of New York's Jewish gangsters, Samuel Ornitz describes the eruption of a gang war between the Jews and the Irish, after the latter killed a Jewish peddler:

> The [Jewish] gangs took up the Mick challenge gladly. It engendered that feverish, fanatical spirit that comes with religious war. The Irish lads shouted "Kill the Christ killers," and the Jewish boys cried "Mopolize the Micks." (A strange word, probably coming from the [Hebrew] root of *mopel,* to abort. In any event it implied the direst punishment.)[48]

Ornitz's protagonist—who, like Isaac Babel's Odessa gangsters, was conjured into being in the early 1920s—compares himself to "the Maccabeans," the tough Hebrews who defended ancient Israel from the Greeks.[49] To be a Jewish gangster is to be a conqueror, a deity, a celebrity of epic proportions.

Writers of fiction have not been alone in negating the diaspora through images of delinquency and violence, as tough Jewish criminals in Europe and America often fashion themselves into Robin Hood figures and fighters for the downtrodden. The legendary pirate and freebooter Jean Lafitte claimed that the Inquisition's persecution of his Spanish-Jewish grandmother impelled him to become "an errant liberator of the suffering masses, with the reward of undergoing periods of exile, imprisonment, mendacity, false judgments and sufferings caused by despotic men."[50] More than a century later, Meyer Lansky likewise invoked the memory of Old World persecution to justify his violent career in New York:

> One man . . . held a meeting in my grandfather's house. . . . "Jews," he shouted. "Why do you just stand around like stupid sheep and let them come and kill you, steal your money, kill your sons, and rape your daughters? Aren't you ashamed? You must stand up and fight. You are men like other men. A Jew can fight. We have no arms, but it doesn't matter. We can use sticks and stones. Fight back."
>
> This speech is burned in my memory. . . . I carried the words with me when I finally traveled with my mother to America and the Lower East Side. I remembered those words when I fought back at the Irish as a boy on the East Side. They were like flaming arrows in my head.[51]

Much like Jean Lafitte and Meyer Lansky, Odessa's Jewish gangsters portrayed themselves as heroes; they manipulated Jewish stereotypes so their admirers would venerate them for overturning centuries of affliction.

The Jewish rogue has remained an underlying cultural archetype of deviance from medieval Europe through twentieth-century America and Odessa, despite fulfilling distinct functions at different times in history: medieval stereotypes of the Jew as diabolical thief were at least partly intended to demonstrate Christianity's superiority over Judaism, the latter's displacement by the former as God's chosen people;[52] writers like Sholem Asch and Joseph Opatoshu propagated the Jew as robust thief to undermine traditional representations of the shtetl Jew as the pious scholar; in New York, the Jewish gangster championed himself (and was championed by others) as a defender of the powerless.[53] The Jewish criminal has been an important cultural trope for both Christians and Jews, and although his image has mutated according to different social conditions, his transformation from medieval demon to Hebraic hero does not imply the complete elimination of earlier images.

By the time Eastern European Jewry started settling Odessa in significant numbers during the mid-nineteenth century, the southern seaport had already developed a notoriety for its wickedness. The coming of the Jews to this "wicked city" led to Jewish involvement in its underworld, and it also triggered the injection of the deviant Jewish thief and all his implicit historical baggage into the city's folklore. But the transformation of Odessa into a *Jewish* city of sin was as much the product of Jewish efforts to shape Odessa's dissipated image—by celebrating the city's thieves, swindlers, and merrymakers through the use of Jewish humor. They conquered Russia's Eldorado by unleashing their wit into a receptive cultural environment. And, in doing so, they made the myth of old Odessa their own.

Jewish Humor

Despite the tremendous variation in humor across different societies, joke telling fulfills certain common functions and shares important attributes that transcend cultural boundaries. Humor challenges the existing order of things by undermining accepted notions of causality, hierarchy, expectations, and consequences. The joke's denigration of prevailing values is usually ephemeral; it tears at a social fabric that can quickly reassert itself. Yet the joke, writes Simon Critchley, demonstrates "the sheer contingency and arbitrariness of the social rites in which we engage." Humor produces what Critchley calls "a consciousness of contingency," and this can leave a lasting impression on people's understanding of social norms.[54] As a weapon of the marginal and the powerless, humor confronts prevailing norms within a cultural community and between different cultures engaged in what appears to be an asymmetrical relationship of power. Humor is an effective instrument of protection, as it can destabilize social, cultural, and political boundaries by donning the guise of levity and wit.

But Jewish humor is distinctive in many respects, largely owing to the context in which it developed. Most scholars agree that modern Jewish humor emerged

during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the Yiddish-speaking shtetls of Eastern Europe, during a time of intellectual ferment and cultural change within the Jewish community. Emanuel Goldsmith argues that Hasidism (Jewish Pietism) and the Haskalah (the Jewish Enlightenment), two movements that arose in the eighteenth century to challenge traditional Judaism, employed wit to poke fun at the strictness and rigidity of the accepted standards of Judaic practices.[55] In this environment, writes Avner Ziv, "humour developed as a weapon of criticising those who held differing views on what was in the community's best interests."[56] Humor became a mechanism of self-censure, a tool to satirize what many perceived as communal inadequacies, and a means for intimating the necessity for internal reform.

Because Jewish humor seems to criticize the Jews themselves—their values, their relationships, and their daily activities—it has often been argued that Jewish humor is uniquely self-deprecating, bordering on masochistic. Freud first suggested this in 1905, famously insisting that "I do not know whether there are many other instances of a people making fun to such a degree of its own character" as the Jews.[57] But challenges to traditional Judaism did not solely lead the Jews to turn their gaze inward; the emergence of new ideologies transformed the Jewish perspective on their place within the surrounding world, inducing many to question their seemingly precarious existence amid a sea of Gentiles. "Jewish humor," writes Sarah Blacher Cohen, was "born out of the vast discrepancy between what was to be the 'chosen people's' glorious destiny and their desperate straits" of destitution and impeded upward mobility.[58] Divine chosenness seemed to imply abandonment on earth or, more precisely, special selection for punishment and suffering. It was as if the Jews were "the butt of a cruel joke," chosen by God for pogroms and poverty rather than the kingdom of the righteous.[59]

What makes the humor of the Jews unique is the coupling of self-disparagement with the use of irony to underscore the incongruity between their pitiful social condition and their lingering hope for a glorious future as God's chosen. This tension between the ideal of chosenness and the expected sufferings of a people in exile is at the root of the Jewish art of "kvetching"—the need to express oneself by complaining in almost every situation. Whether satisfied, dissatisfied, jubilant, or angry, kvetching is inevitably the Jewish response. As Michael Wex writes:

> Judaism is defined by exile, and exile without complaint is tourism, not deportation. . . . If we stop kvetching, how will we know that life isn't supposed to be like this? If we don't keep kvetching we'll forget who we really are. Kvetching lets us remember that we've got nowhere to go because we're so special.[60]

The Jew cannot be satisfied, for to express fulfillment is to forget that one is in exile. Kvetching is the only acceptable response for the East European Jew.

Kvetching is closely intertwined with arguing, and the comical Jew is frequently involved in some sort of debate, disagreement, or squabble. This is in part a legacy of the Talmud, which governed Jewish social and religious life for centuries. The Talmud is infamous for what appears to be endless discussions and meandering digressions, and, ever since the Haskalah and Hasidism began to question the foundations of traditional Judaism, humor has been used to ridicule the Talmud's alleged "sophistry" and "sterility of thought," as Ruth Wisse puts it.[61] Jewish folklore and anecdotes are replete with what has been called "Talmudic logic" and "Talmudic hairsplitting," a tendency toward overanalysis, flawed logic, and circular reasoning.[62] Yet the comical Jew often exploits Talmudic logic to achieve subversive ends, even invoking the great rabbinical sages to justify sordid behavior. Disreputable Jews hiding behind Judaic wisdom fill the pages of the Canadian writer Mordecai Richler's novels, such as Moey Hanover, who was caught having an extra-marital affair. Moey's Talmudic education, however, allowed him to swear to his wife,

> hand over his boy's head, that appearances notwithstanding, he had not been unfaithful to her. For, he argued with himself, to be unfaithful is to commit adultery, it is to have carnal knowledge of another woman, but to lie in bed in the afternoon in the Paramount Hotel and have your toes sucked one by one is no such thing, even if he did moan with pleasure, for, as Reb Gamliel would be the first to ask, could his big toe ejaculate? No. Could his little toe, even nibbled to distraction, impregnate another woman? No. Could it bring home the clap, as Rabbi Azariah might ask? No. These were not even his private parts.[63]

Moey Hanover comically illustrates how Judaism's most sacred texts can be a means of empowerment rather than a route to diasporic captivity. By summoning tradition, the Jewish rogue transcends the expected boundaries of exile.

The historical primacy of argument and debate in Jewish culture explains why Jewish tricksters and swindlers are depicted as masters in the art of linguistic manipulation. Shtetl folklore and humor are filled with characters who employ seemingly flawed logic to achieve their often ignoble objectives. Many anecdotes involve the Jewish marriage broker (or *shadkhn* in Yiddish), who, according to Michael Wex, "was the Yiddish world's version of the used car salesman" for his skills in convincing prospective grooms to accept less-than-savory brides.[64] But the archetypal rogue of the shtetl is the Jewish mooch, known in Yiddish as the *schnorrer.* Unrivaled in manipulating language and logic, he is infamous for using both to entrap potential benefactors into supporting him. William Novak and Moshe Waldoks define the schnorrer as "a Jewish beggar with *chutzpah* [audacity]. He does not actually solicit help; he *demands* it, and considers it his right."[65] The schnorrer

has no misgivings over wasting other people's time and justifies his actions by what appears to be common sense. One anecdote describes how

> a *schnorrer* is having heart problems and goes to a very expensive specialist. When the time comes to pay, the *schnorrer* says he has no money at all.
>
> "So why did you come to me?" the doctor asks angrily. "You *know* I am the most expensive doctor in Vienna."
>
> "Because when it comes to my health, I want only the best."[66]

The schnorrer is skilled at presenting himself as a munificent provider, even when he is doing the providing with somebody else's money:

> Every Friday evening for years, the *schnorrer* had appeared at the rich man's house for the Sabbath meal. But one Friday, a young stranger appeared with him.
>
> The host, put out by this, asked, "who is this?"
>
> "Oh," replied the *schnorrer* tolerantly, "I suppose I should have told you. It's my new son-in-law. You see, I promised to give him board for the first year!"[67]

A charlatan he may be, but the schnorrer cannot be faulted for neglecting his family.

Scholars generally maintain that schnorring has been common among Jews—both in reality and in folklore—because the Torah explicitly orders those with financial means to help the poor.[68] Charity (or *tsdakah* in Hebrew) is a Jewish obligation, and the schnorrer invokes Judaic law to gain his sustenance, shaming others into helping him. The British author Israel Zangwill elaborately describes the art of schnorring in his novel *The King of the Schnorrers,* originally published in 1894. The story's central character is a shabby vagrant who liberally invokes "Talmudical dialectics"[69] and Scripture to hoodwink a prosperous Jew into sheltering, clothing, and feeding him. The schnorrer skillfully uses what he declares to be unassailable Judaic logic to make the absurd seem rational. He repeatedly insists that he, the schnorrer, is the one engaged in the greatest act of charity by *allowing* his benefactor to support him, for such philanthropy is necessary to achieve the grace of God. The schnorrer is a trickster with a Jewish twist, as he transforms mooching into a virtue through eloquence and logic, without ever denying that he is fundamentally a chiseler.[70]

The schnorrer is in many respects the exemplary character of Jewish humor, as he exhibits the amalgamation of three key ingredients: the sense of entitlement of a divinely chosen nation, the self-denigration of a hapless people abandoned to their suffering, and the dexterous use of linguistic manipulation rooted in Talmudic logic and hairsplitting. What makes Jewish humor uniquely ironic is the intersec-

tion of these elements. The schnorrer is the physical embodiment of this trinity, and the kvetch is the tool of his trickery.

Jewish humor was born in Yiddish-speaking Eastern Europe in a bygone era, part of a culture whose primary language has largely vanished. Like the humor of most cultures, Jewish humor originated as an oral culture, and its written history essentially began in the late nineteenth century with the emergence of modern Yiddish literature.[71] Its existence as a written culture was thus ephemeral, ultimately destroyed by emigration, assimilation, and the Holocaust. But the distinctive Jewish wit survived the decimation of the shtetl and the demise of its language, and has had its greatest impact through its infiltration of other languages in the twentieth century. Scholars have documented the "Yiddishization" of American humor (and American English) that has taken place, pointing out the vastly disproportionate role Jews have played in American comedy.[72] But a similar phenomenon occurred in twentieth-century Russia, where the Jews who adopted Russian as their primary language did not always abandon their cultural origins. The schnorrer and his kvetch found a new home in the Soviet Union. Whereas, in America, cosmopolitan New York became the hub for this fusion of cultures, Odessa emerged as Russia's epicenter and incubator of Jewish humor. And the Yiddishization of its culture transformed Odessa from a wicked city of thieves into a sardonic city of rogues and schnorrers.

Odessa as "The Jewish City of Sin"

Old Odessa is often called a "Jewish city," and, as with the many other cities noted for their Jewish character, the term is used with reverence and disdain, depending on one's perspective. Throughout history, urban Jews have frequently had an impact on their surroundings that has far outweighed their share of the total population, but in many of the cities branded as "Jewish" their demographic presence alone warranted such a designation. At the turn of the twentieth century, most of these cities could be found in the Russian Empire, as nearly half of the world's ten million Jews were concentrated in Russia's Pale of Settlement. In 1897, 210,526 residents in Warsaw were Jewish—over one-third of the city's total inhabitants, second in number only to the Polish Catholics who made up just over half the population.[73] In Vilnius (known at the time as Vilna), 41 percent of the city's 154,532 people were Jews; in Minsk their share in a population of 90,912 was 52 percent; among Kishinev's 108,408 inhabitants, 46 percent were Jewish; and in Odessa—the empire's fourth largest city—over 33 percent of the city's 403,815 people were Jewish.[74] But as the twentieth century unfolded and Jews increasingly emigrated from the Pale, "Jewish cities" began to develop elsewhere, particularly in the United States, with New York emerging as the most demographically and culturally Jewish of all such cities, and emblematic of Jewish settlement in the

New World as a whole.[75] Between 1920 and 1960 the Jews were the largest ethnoreligious community in New York, and by the end of this period they numbered 2.1 million (27 percent of the total population).[76] Although each of these cities had fundamentally different ethnic compositions, economies, and political dynamics, they all shared one important common element—the demographic weight of a Jewish community that had an indelible impact on each city's history and culture.

But unlike other prominent Jewish cities, Odessa has been mythologized as a Judeo-kleptocracy, a land whose governing attributes were an amalgam of Jewishness and criminality embedded in a setting that was at once paradise and hell, Eldorado and Gomorrah, lush, opulent, disorderly, and corrupt. Old Odessa was alone in having the Jewish gangster crowned king, his tavern consecrated, and the chronicles of his dissipated life hallowed in humor and in song. The presence of a powerful Jewish underworld has been well documented for many of these cities, particularly Warsaw and New York, but neither they nor Vilna nor Minsk entered the annals of modern mythology with the notoriety of old Odessa. To phrase the question as a Talmudic scholar might put it, "Why is this town different from all the rest?"

Warsaw and Vilna were undoubtedly two of the most important social and cultural centers for Russian Jewry in the nineteenth century, but neither could have been mythologized as a Judeo-kleptocracy. Vilna already had its own legendary place in Jewish culture, sanctified as the "Jerusalem of Lithuania."[77] The Jews of Vilna were historically revered for their piety, intellect, and scholarly achievement. In the eighteenth century the city was home to Elijah Ben Solomon Zalman, known as the Vilna Gaon, a powerful rabbinic authority recognized among Ashkenazic Jewry for his command of both Judaic knowledge and secular learning.[78] A myth of Vilna already existed by the early nineteenth century, and the cherished memory of Lithuania's Jerusalem remains a powerful image in Jewish consciousness today.

Warsaw perhaps had more in common with Odessa than Vilna did, insofar as it was an important hub for Jewish criminals in nineteenth-century Europe.[79] The prostitution trade flourished in Warsaw, with Jews playing a part in all aspects of this industry. Various Yiddish writers, most notably Sholem Asch and Isaac Bashevis Singer, vividly portrayed the city's commodified debauchery.[80] Before World War I Warsaw was also infamous for having had a "school of thieves," directed by Abraham Tselender, whose "graduates" operated not only in Poland but throughout the Russian Empire and Germany.[81] Much like their Odessan counterparts, the Jewish gangsters of Warsaw were a recognized component of a city noted for its ethnic diversity and rapid social and economic growth during the nineteenth century.

But Warsaw was not and could not be mythologized as the Jewish city of sin because of its particular place in Polish history and collective memory. Warsaw had

replaced Krakow as the capital of Poland in the sixteenth century, and following the state's partition at the hands of Russia, Austria, and Prussia during the eighteenth century, it persisted as an important center of Polish culture, one of the principal hubs of Poland's nationalist movement for self-determination, and the envisioned capital of a resurrected Polish state. Warsaw may have boasted one of the most populous and culturally important Jewish communities, but it was already a city with a titular nationality. It may have been multiethnic, cosmopolitan, and a magnet for immigrants, but it was ultimately a city imagined to belong to the Polish people, who (ironically) lost their historic homeland at the very moment nationalism began to spread across the European continent.

Odessa, like Warsaw, was multiethnic, culturally cosmopolitan, and heavily Jewish, but with a fundamental difference: nineteenth-century Odessa was not (and could not be) claimed as the historic homeland of any nationality. Catherine the Great and her successors most certainly saw Odessa and the surrounding region as an integral and economically valuable piece of the Russian Empire, but it was newly conquered territory (and aptly named "New Russia" [Novorossiia]), previously controlled by the Ottoman Empire, and sparsely populated. Odessa was founded and built by immigrants, including Italians, Greeks, Bulgarians, Frenchmen, Jews, Russians, and Ukrainians, and each group left its mark on what would become Russia's most important southern seaport. By the last decade of the nineteenth century the Jewish share of the population had risen to one-third, making them the most numerous ethno-religious community in Odessa after the Russians, much as the Jews were second only to the Poles in Warsaw. But, unlike Warsaw, Odessa had entered the nineteenth century as a nascent city, one that had yet to be peopled and one that had yet to be inscribed into any people's collective memory.

And it is precisely in this sense that Odessa has more in common with New York than with Warsaw, Vilna, or Minsk. New York is America's archetypal immigrant metropolis, and, like Odessa, successive waves of settlers have shaped the city's culture and identity, with the Jews ranking among the most significant. "If you live in New York you're Jewish," wrote Lenny Bruce in his memoirs, a laudatory witticism different in intent, but not in essence, from Jesse Jackson infamously branding New York as "Hymietown."[82] Moreover, Jewish criminality thrived in New York during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with Meyer Lansky, Bugsy Siegel, and other notorious gangsters leaving their mark on the Lower East Side and in the legends of old New York.

But the myth of New York lacks one key element that has defined old Odessa since its very inception: old Odessa has been mythologized as an exotic city of sin, a balmy paradise beyond civilization, at the edge of an untamed frontier. New York may have been the imagined promised land on the edge of the world for the impoverished masses of Europe, but it was an established city within a nexus of established cities; nineteenth-century New York was not a spontaneous boomtown

amid the wilds of nature as was San Francisco during the Gold Rush. And it was not, first and foremost, a city defined by its rogues and sinners, as was New Orleans ("the Great Southern Babylon") and Shanghai ("the Whore of Asia"). Old Odessa was exotic because it was a glittering oasis of transgression in Russia's southern hinterland, physically and figuratively far away from the frigid wintry nights of Petersburg and Moscow.

Odessa was hardly the lone southern seaport inhabited by Jews, and historians have in fact studied the unique qualities of Jewish communities in port cities. But with few exceptions they have ignored the relationship between the seaport and criminality. For these scholars, the cosmopolitan and commercial opportunities of the port city—be it Odessa, Salonika, or Trieste—induced Jews to abandon tradition, piety, and insularity in favor of secularism, pragmatism, and an industrious work ethic.[83] David Cesarini maintains that these "port Jews" pursued "a singular path into Jewish modernity," shaped by commercial utilitarianism rather than ideology.[84] The Jews of Odessa, particularly in the mid-nineteenth century, did fit this profile to a certain extent, and, as Steven J. Zipperstein has demonstrated, there was a direct correlation between commercial prosperity and the great intellectuals and politicians who either grew up in Odessa or briefly made it their home.[85] But the rejection of tradition in favor of the seaport's multiethnic cosmopolitanism and permissiveness often led to the tavern and the brothel, rather than the stock exchange and the university. And it was the Jewish merrymaker, the jokester, and the gangster—not the industrious grain merchant—who were later mythologized as old Odessa's leading citizens.

Old Odessa in Russian and Soviet History

At first glance it may seem as if the myth of old Odessa's importance in Jewish history far outweighs its place in Russian history. During the tsarist era the city's culture was very different from cultural life in St. Petersburg, Moscow, and Kiev. By the mid-nineteenth century, Odessa's lingua franca may have been Russian, but it was a Russian infused with Italian, Yiddish, Hebrew, Greek, and thieves' cant, with a Yiddish-inflected sardonic intonation. Russian and foreign visitors alike recognized Odessa's atmosphere of otherness, and, for this reason, the city elicited both fascination and contempt, with proponents and enemies at the Imperial court vying to shape Odessa's envisioned future.[86] And although Odessa was Russia's fourth-largest city on the eve of World War I and at the heart of Russia's lucrative grain trade, the city's culture did not have a significant impact on prerevolutionary Russian culture. To be sure, luminaries such as Aleksandr Pushkin and Nikolai Gogol spent time in Odessa, and, by the early twentieth century, well-known Russian writers and humorists, including Vlas Doroshevich and Aleksandr Kuprin, began to center some of their writings in Odessa, bringing the city's irreverent and eccentric characters to audiences in the capitals.[87] But the myth of old Odessa

remained on the periphery of tsarist-era Russian culture, much as the city itself remained geographically on the empire's periphery.

This was all to change under Soviet rule. The Russian Revolution dismantled the Pale of Settlement, and, by the early 1920s, Russian Jewry had left the cities and shtetls of Ukraine and Belorussia in large numbers for the greater opportunities offered in the capitals.[88] Odessa's promising cultural figures, including Isaac Babel, Il'ia Il'f, Evgenii Petrov, and Leonid Utesov were among these migrants of the early postrevolutionary years. Not all of them were Jewish, but most of them were, and all of them had spent their formative years in Odessa where they had absorbed the city of sin's atmosphere, collecting the legends and lore that would form the basis of their writings, humor, and stage performances, their primary vehicles for delivering the myth to eager Soviet audiences. The Russian Revolution allowed a cultural creation born on the fringes of a toppled empire to migrate, proliferate, and intoxicate the many spectators who soaked up these tales of old Odessa with relish. The Judeo-kleptocracy found a new home in Soviet culture.

But not everyone was happy. Many of the puritanical ideologues of Soviet Communism viewed the Odessa myth's celebration of criminality through bawdy music and frivolous humor with disgust, avowing that the impish Jewish swindler impeded the growth of a healthy proletarian culture. Music and humor needed to play a socially and morally constructive role; amusement was fine, but in a manner controlled to serve the needs of the working class; and the archetypal wayward Odessan (*odessit*) could only assume a legitimate place in Soviet consciousness if he was purged of his wicked and flippant legacy. There should be no place for Babylon in the USSR; there was no room to honor a Judeo-kleptocracy.

But the vilification of old Odessa only heightened its appeal. Branding the myth as the antithesis of proletarian culture and the city's iniquity as forbidden fruit merely entrenched its image as an illicit universe outside official Soviet structures—the negation of the solemnity, hierarchy, and ideology of Soviet socialism. In many respects, Mikhail Bakhtin's depiction of carnival during the Middle Ages in *Rabelais and His World*—what he calls a "utopian realm of community, freedom, equality, and abundance"—is an apt analogy for old Odessa.[89] Bakhtin maintains that,

> laughter in the Middle Ages remained outside all official spheres of ideology and outside all official strict forms of social relations. . . . An arrogant one-sided tone of seriousness is characteristic of official medieval culture. The very contents of medieval ideology—asceticism, somber providentialism, sin, atonement, suffering, as well as the character of the feudal regime, with its oppression and intimidation—all these elements determined this tone of icy petrified seriousness. It was supposedly the only tone fit to express the true, the good, and all that was essential and meaningful. Fear, religious awe, humility, these were the overtones of this seriousness.[90]

Carnival represents the temporary suspension of the medieval order, where the laughter and vulgar speech of the marketplace triumph over official discourse, where indulgence supplants asceticism, where the spontaneous uproots the dogmatic. Carnival, write Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist, "is a minimally ritualized antiritual, a festive celebration of the other, the gaps and holes in all the mappings of the world laid out in systematic theologies, legal codes, normative poetics, and class hierarchies."[91] And perhaps Bakhtin had Odessa specifically in mind when depicting carnival, as he had lived in Odessa for a number of years. According to Clark and Holquist, "the same sense of fun and irreverence that gave birth to Babel's Rabelaisian gangster or to the tricks and deceptions of Ostap Bender, the picaro created by Il'f and Petrov, left its mark on Bakhtin."[92] The city of sin's magnetism increased with every assault by the Soviet state, and the myth of old Odessa survived the proletarian order of morality and temperance.

Yet despite the vilification of wicked old Odessa as the polar opposite of noble Soviet socialism, the relationship between Odessa's mythmakers and the Soviet state was far more complex. Some of Odessa's greatest proponents, most notably Isaac Babel, perished during the Stalin era, but others remained in the regime's good graces and continued to see themselves as loyal Soviet citizens. Leonid Utesov, a talented musician and performer, achieved a level of officially sanctioned stardom in the USSR with his Jewish-inflected jazz, his comedic sketches, his film performances, and his good looks, which Stalin and his Politburo could hardly match. And, indeed, many in Stalin's Politburo—including "Iron" Lazar Kaganovich and Stalin himself—enjoyed Utesov's bawdy music.[93] Not every Bolshevik saw old Odessa as a threat, and not every mythmaker felt threatened by the Bolshevik state. Soviet culture was far from monolithic, and, accordingly, the celebration of the Jewish city of sin persisted for most of the twentieth century.

The myth of old Odessa survived the Soviet Union, much as it had survived the anarchy of revolution and civil war seven decades earlier. Contemporary Odessans still delight in the legends of gallant gangsters, the ecstatic nights of wild music and drinking, and the incessant laughter of its irrepressible merrymakers. The gilded city of rogues and schnorrers is an integral component of Odessa's collective memory, but these are memories that have resonated far beyond the city's walls. Revolution and successive waves of migration have allowed the legends to spread so that others could mentally drink from the waters of Eldorado, yearn for the city's imagined treasures, and marvel at the improbability of a Judeokleptocracy on the exotic shores of the Black Sea.

CHAPTER 1 *The Birth of Old Odessa*

"I'M GOING TO ODESSA for money!" declared Reb Khaim-Shulim, an impoverished and hapless Jew living in Kishinev during the mid-nineteenth century. Fed up with supporting a large family and living his life from hand to mouth, Khaim-Shulim packed his bags and set off for the wondrous city on the Black Sea, which was then all the rage among the Jews in Russia's Pale of Settlement. But Khaim-Shulim's friend, Reb Haskel, saw nothing but danger in Khaim-Shulim's future: "It's a spoiled, spoiled city I tell you . . . there will be dark temptations everywhere; in the cafés, in the theaters. Take a prayer book with you and read psalms in your spare time; it will be edifying."[1]

By the time Khaim-Shulim, a literary character invented by the Russian-Jewish writer Osip Rabinovich, embarked upon his journey to Russia's southern frontier, Odessa was already a town with a notorious reputation: a land of opulence and sin, a city where wealth could easily be acquired and where revelry and decadence lurked around every corner. Reb Khaim-Shulim may have been among the first "shtetl" Jews to travel to Odessa, but he was making a journey of exploration and imagination undertaken and recorded by many actual travelers before him—including Russians, Englishmen, Frenchmen, Germans, and Italians. These sojourners laid the foundations for the myth of old Odessa in their letters, travelogues, and memoirs, creating the discursive blueprint for what would become Russia's foremost city of affluence and dissipation. From the mid-nineteenth century on, Jewish travelers (both literary and real) came to Odessa in droves. Writers like Osip Rabinovich and Sholem Aleichem embraced and appropriated the embryonic Odessa myth and, through their writings, imbued it with elements of Jewish culture and humor.

The first hundred years of Odessa's existence was the critical period in which both Odessa the city and Odessa the myth emerged. From its foundation in 1794 through the nineteenth century, Odessa was transformed from a small Turkish outpost into a large Russian metropolis. The city's size and reputation grew as more and more people streamed in to experience its allure firsthand. Many of those who chose to record their impressions did not find the town of magic they had envisioned. Nevertheless, seekers of Russia's Eldorado kept coming, observing, and recording what they saw, thereby reproducing and reinforcing the city's fabled aura. By 1905, which in Odessa meant revolution, the Potemkin Uprising, and the largest

pogrom to occur thus far in the Russian Empire, there already existed a "myth of old Odessa"—a land of wealth, sin, and rogues which was imagined and narrated through the idiom and culture of East European Jewry.

The City by the Sea

Odessa's early history is connected with Imperial Russia's southward expansion. One of Russia's principal achievements during the reign of Catherine the Great was the conquest of a vast swath of territory along the northern shores of the Black Sea.[2] Ever since Peter the Great had built the first Russian navy during the late seventeenth century Russia had struggled against the Ottoman Empire for a foothold in this sparsely populated yet economically and geopolitically strategic frontier region.[3] But it would not be until the last three decades of the eighteenth century when, through a series of wars and treaties, Russia at last gained its long coveted outlet to the Black Sea. What had formerly been an Ottoman lake now became an international seaway which the tsarist regime could exploit and develop to further the growth of Russian commerce.[4] Catherine dubbed these southern acquisitions "New Russia" (*Novorossiia*) already in 1764, thirty years before Turkey formally ceded most of these territories.[5] Economic expansion began almost immediately, but the absence of populated cities and efficient seaports compelled the Russian government to fill the region with settlers and to embark upon a massive urban construction program.[6]

Given that city development in New Russia was linked to the regime's desire to build an effective seaport, officials at court expressed divergent views on the best possible location for such a facility. Various coastal towns were suggested and assessed for their relative merits, including Kherson, Nikolaev, and Ochakov. The majority, however, ultimately favored Khadzhibei because of its good natural harbor, which was deep and ice-free for most of the year.[7] Under the command of the Neapolitan Don Joseph de Ribas, the Russian army had stormed and captured Khadzhibei in September 1789, which was then a small Tartar village with a multiethnic population largely engaged in trade and fishing.[8] With Khadzhibei's de jure annexation to Russia in 1794 under the provisions of the Treaty of Jassy, Catherine the Great decreed her intention to transform it into New Russia's foremost seaport and city.[9]

Khadzhibei's annexation was almost immediately followed by its rechristening as "Odessa," a name filled with historical resonance for Catherine.[10] It was believed at the time that Khadzhibei sat on the site of the ancient Hellenic city of Odessos, where, legend had it, Odysseus had stopped during his celebrated voyage.[11] Although subsequent archeology would prove that Odessos had, in fact, been located in present-day Bulgaria, constructing a link between New Russia and classical civilization served Catherine's purposes well.[12] During the eighteenth-

century Age of Reason the Ancients were considered the essence of rationality and order, and Catherine's nod to the Greeks was intended to buttress her claim to be a progressive and enlightened European monarch.[13]

With economic growth, population settlement, and city planning paramount on the tsarist agenda, Catherine and her nineteenth-century heirs appointed a succession of able administrators to create a flourishing metropolis out of Odessa.[14] Educated, politically adept, considered progressive-minded, and often non-Russian in origin, Odessa's early rulers are credited with making it into Russia's fourth most populous city and its second busiest commercial port by 1863.[15] Joseph de Ribas presided over the city's planning with the skillful assistance of his Dutch colleague, Franz de Voland, who was charged with building the port.[16] They set the standard for those who followed them, with each subsequent administrator succeeding in acquiring and maintaining various benefits and concessions for both the city itself and its prospective settlers.[17] Consequently, Odessa experienced a period of almost unremitting growth from its founding in 1794 until the mid-nineteenth century.

Because of its strategic location, the government envisioned Odessa as Russia's chief entrepôt of commodities to and from Europe.[18] A significant step forward occurred in 1817, when the Russian government designated Odessa a free port, a status it maintained for forty years. Goods prohibited or heavily taxed elsewhere in the empire could now enter Odessa without duty. Free transit of commodities to and from foreign countries was permitted.[19] In 1829 the Treaty of Adrianople between Russia and the Ottoman Empire granted the right of free passage to ships of all states at peace with the latter through the Bosporus Straits.[20]

Odessa's road to success was paved by Russia's burgeoning role in the international grain trade, with fertile Ukraine increasingly becoming Europe's breadbasket. The upheavals of the Napoleonic Wars disrupted the food supply on the continent, and the warring armies needed to be fed.[21] Between 1815 and 1818 Western Europe suffered repeated harvest failures, leading to a dramatic rise in grain prices.[22] Population growth and the mobilization of labor due to industrialization further heightened the demand for Russian grain.[23] Consequently, commercial activity through Odessa's port increased more than fourfold between 1820 and 1853.[24]

Odessa's economic boom occurred in tandem with a continuous population explosion that lasted right up until World War I. Between 1794 and 1825 the city's population increased from 2,345 to 32,000. Over the next four decades this number quadrupled to 118,970. In 1904 Odessa's population stood at 511,000.[25] Only St. Petersburg, Moscow, and Warsaw had more people, but none of them could match Odessa's nineteenth-century growth rate. In this sense, Odessa resembled an American boomtown more than a Russian city[26]

The Russian government harnessed all its resources to populate New Russia in general, and Odessa in particular. Catherine the Great and her favorites at court

offered prospective immigrants a multitude of incentives to abandon their homes and start new lives down south. Runaway serfs were promised their liberty if they crossed over into New Russia, and various religious dissident groups, such as the Dukhobors, came with the assurance of freedom of worship.[27] Russia's Jews, who were subject to severe residency restrictions and denied freedom of movement in Russia proper, were welcomed in Odessa, and thousands migrated from the crowded shtetls of Poland, Ukraine, and Belorussia.[28]

But Odessa was not merely populated by Russian subjects, as Catherine sought to recruit settlers from abroad. Many colonists came from the Ottoman Empire, particularly Christian minorities whose animosity toward their Muslim rulers could ostensibly furnish Russia with a loyal populace to strengthen this vulnerable border region.[29] This included Greeks, Bulgarians, Albanians, and Armenians, with religious toleration, land grants, and tax exemptions extending to them as well.[30] Western Europeans also came, perhaps following the example of Odessa's first two governors, who were both Frenchmen.[31] Italian virtually served as the city's lingua franca, particularly in the commercial realm, and street signs were in both Italian and Russian for the first half of the nineteenth century.[32]

As the decades progressed and its population grew, Odessa maintained its multiethnic, immigrant character. According to the 1897 census, only 56.7 percent of Odessans claimed Russian as their mother tongue.[33] The remainder spoke a total of fifty languages with Yiddish (32.5 percent), Ukrainian (5.66 percent), Polish (4.48 percent), German (2.61 percent), and Greek (1.32 percent) ranking highest.[34] Although Greeks only made up 1.32 percent of Odessa's population in 1897, this number belies the significant role played by Greek settlers in the city's economic development and cultural life, particularly in the first half of the nineteenth century. A so-called trade diaspora of Greeks had already inhabited the Black Sea region for thousands of years, when, in the 1790s, they started streaming into Odessa.[35] The Greeks quickly became the principal ethnic group managing the international grain trade, amassing personal fortunes while also contributing to Russia's welfare.[36] In the 1810s seven out of the ten richest merchants in Odessa were reputedly Greek.[37] The Greek community maintained their leading role in Odessa until the Crimean War, when Jewish merchants began to displace Greek export firms in the grain trade.[38]

Jewish merchants' rise to prominence in the mid-nineteenth century is part and parcel of the Jewish community's dramatic growth in Odessa and emblematic of a process that had been taking place since the city's founding. By the end of the century the Jews made up one-third of Odessa's population, thus making them the most populous ethnic group in Odessa after the Russians, and the largest Jewish community in Russia with the exception of Warsaw.[39]

Jews had already lived in Khadzhibei under Turkish rule before the Russians conquered the region. Evidence suggests that some had settled there by the mid-eighteenth century, possibly Sephardic Jews who had migrated from the Crimea.[40]

Archeological excavations have unearthed tombstones in Hebrew dated between 1765 and 1789.[41] However, most of those who were still living there upon the outbreak of Russian-Turkish hostilities left the area amid the fighting. When the Russians stormed and occupied the city's fortress in the early 1790s, there were a total of six Jews living in Khadzhibei.[42]

Catherine the Great's fervent desire to populate Odessa with anybody who wished to come and contribute to the economy meant the prospect of vast opportunities for Russia's impoverished Jews. Most of the one million Jews who lived in Russia at the end of the eighteenth century were crowded into the shtetls and cities of Ukraine, Belorussia, and Lithuania; they were in a sense "newcomers" to Russia, as they inhabited the territory the tsarist government had annexed during the late-eighteenth-century partitions and dismantling of the Polish state.[43] For perceived reasons of security, economic necessity, and perhaps a bit of Judeophobia, Catherine and her successors imposed severe residency restrictions upon the Jews.[44] The Jews were largely compelled to remain within these newly acquired Polish territories—subsequently known to history as the Pale of Settlement—and were prohibited from settling and traveling in Russia proper, despite their poverty and congested living conditions.[45] Accordingly, when the Russian government decreed that sparsely populated New Russia was open to Jewish settlement, thousands took up the offer and came to Odessa and its neighboring towns en masse in a continuous torrential flow of migrants, which lasted for most of the nineteenth century.[46]

With destitution pushing the Jews out of the shtetls and the expectation of economic success pulling them southward, Odessa's Jewish community grew exponentially, both in absolute terms and in their share of the city's total population. Settlement began immediately, even before the city was officially renamed "Odessa." In 1794 there were already 244 Jewish settlers, more than 10 percent of the city's aggregate population. By 1829, 12,000 of the city's 52,000 residents—over 15 percent—were Jewish. By 1873 the Jewish share of the population had risen to more than one-quarter of Odessa's 193,000 inhabitants. And in 1912, on the eve of World War I, the Jewish community numbered 200,000, with one out of every three Odessans being Jewish.[47]

Jewish population growth in Odessa was matched by the creation and flourishing of cultural and religious organizations. A large synagogue was built in 1795, and by 1849 there were four, supplemented by nineteen smaller prayer houses.[48] The first Talmud-Torah opened in the 1790s, and by the mid-nineteenth century there were over fifty schools for Jewish children.[49] In 1809 Odessa's first Rabbi, Itskhok Rabinovich, arrived from Bessarabia.[50] A Jewish hospital opened in 1802, complementing the Jewish burial society that had been organized in the previous decade.[51] Communal institutions were thus in place to ensure that Odessa's Jews received education, spiritual ministration, and health care from cradle to grave.

But such institutions only present part of the picture: Jewish cultural achievements in Odessa are tied to the rise of a secular intelligentsia, with Odessa becoming an important center of the Haskalah, or "Jewish Enlightenment," and the Jewish publishing industry.[52] The Haskalah in Odessa began with a group of settlers who migrated to the city from Brody, a town in Austrian-controlled Galicia. Initially attracted to New Russia because of its commercial prospects, Galician merchants started arriving in the 1820s. Taking up prominent roles as middlemen in the grain trade, they ascended the ladder of economic success.[53] In 1840 they opened up the Brodskii Synagogue, the first "modern" synagogue in Russia whose service was patterned on the reforms then taking place in Germany.[54] The Brodskii Synagogue subsequently became famous (and infamous in traditional circles) for its melodies rather than its liturgy: German-influenced choral music replaced medieval Hebrew compositions under the direction of celebrated cantors and with the accompaniment of an organ, whose use was regarded as anathema among Orthodox Jews.[55] By the mid-nineteenth century it was often said that the "fires of hell encircle Odessa," a saying attributed to the Hasidic Rebbe of Savran, and adopted by others who condemned Odessans for their religious laxity and pursuit of secular knowledge and culture.[56]

The 1850s and 1860s marked the zenith of the Haskalah in Russia, and Odessa emerged as one of its leading centers, second only to Vilna, which was known as the "Jerusalem of Lithuania."[57] As the era of the Great Reforms under Tsar Alexander II was characterized by the opening up of public debate over the modernization of Russia and its people, Jewish intellectuals were among those who took this opportunity to discuss and propagandize for the secularization, acculturation, and educational reform of Russian Jewry and its communal institutions.[58] In fact, Odessa's *maskilim* (as proponents of the Haskalah were known) were at the vanguard of the budding Russian Jewish press. No fewer than five different Jewish newspapers were published in Odessa at various points during the 1860s. Odessa was the only Russian city that could boast of Jewish publications in three languages: Hebrew, Yiddish, and Russian.[59] The Odessan Jewish press may not have survived the 1860s, but its brief history later served as a precedent and a shining example for the dozens of Jewish newspapermen who subsequently rose to prominence at the turn of the twentieth century.

Most scholars agree that the Haskalah in Russia tapered off during the 1870s and, for all intents and purposes, came to a close in 1881, after the assassination of Alexander II ushered in an era of political reaction and a general disillusionment with the prospects of social reform and integration.[60] Yet Odessa remained an important center for Jewish culture and political activism for the remainder of the Imperial era. The 1880s marked the onset of the golden age of Yiddish litera-

ture, and two of the movement's founding fathers, Sholem Abramovich (better known as Mendele Mokher Sforim, or simply Mendele) and Sholem Aleichem made Odessa their home for many years.[61] Mendele settled in Odessa in 1881 and remained there until his death in 1917.[62] He served as a magnet for other Jewish writers—Hebraists, Yiddishists, and Russianists—who all visited Odessa to pay their respects to the "Grandfather of Yiddish literature."[63] Odessa was also home to prominent Palestinophiles and Zionists, including Leon Pinsker, Ahad Ha-am, and, somewhat later, Vladimir (Ze'ev) Jabotinsky. As one historian puts it, "the Jewish community of Odessa continued to stand in the vanguard of nearly every modernist Jewish movement developed in the Russian empire."[64]

On the eve of the twentieth century Odessa's Jews were among the most economically successful, financially affluent, politically active, and integrated of all the Jewish communities in Russia.[65] Conservative Jews tended to stay behind in the northern Pale because of Odessa's immigrant character. Those who came were likely to be young, adventurous, and less bound to traditional values and institutions. With economic opportunities abounding amid a general climate of intellectual freedom, Odessa's vibrant Jewish community pursued wealth through trade and a secular culture whose foundations were being laid by the dozens of different ethnic groups settled in the region.[66] Nurtured on Italian opera and prospering as merchants of grain, Odessa's Jews may have been more like those of New York City than those of Minsk, Pinsk, and Berdichev.

And the Jews did prosper in the Russian grain trade, and in the professions, and even in local politics. By 1875 Jews controlled 60 percent of Odessa's commercial firms.[67] In 1881 Jews comprised 66 percent of the city's registered merchants and traders, 86 percent of brokers, 39.58 percent of doctors, and 68.91 percent of pharmacists.[68] In 1796 a Jewish man was one of ten candidates elected to the municipal civil court.[69] Eleven Jews held posts in the city government in 1851.[70] Such statistics indicate that Odessa, in many respects, was becoming a Jewish city.

Eldorado and Gomorrah

Odessa's social, economic, and intellectual history during its first hundred years suggests a city of affluence, ethnic diversity, and an entrenched culture rooted in secularism and enlightenment. By the middle of the nineteenth century a myth of Odessa began to emerge, one that posited the city as Russia's Eldorado—a land of gold, where opulence awaited all who showed up at the city's gates possessing little more than a desire to escape poverty and an insatiable yearning for unbounded riches. Such a myth goes a long way in explaining why thousands continued to flock to Odessa right through the early twentieth century. Ten thousand migrants apparently entered Odessa *annually* in the years leading up to 1903.[71]

And, according to a survey conducted in 1892, only 38.5 percent of the city's Jews were born in Odessa.[72] The city retained its immigrant character, flooded by the many who sought to transform their lives for the better.

In reality, however, destitution awaited most settlers who were unable to find leading places in Odessa's conspicuous yet elusive commercial society.[73] Much like members of other ethnic groups, many Jews found themselves in dire straits, and were compelled to inhabit the crowded and dilapidated Moldavanka District, which by the end of the century had become a neighborhood fraught with crime.[74] A commission of inquiry in 1900 determined that one-third—nearly fifty thousand people—of Odessa's Jews lived in the "poorest and most unsanitary conditions."[75] Most Jews eked out a living as small-time traders, shopkeepers, workshop employers, and factory hands.[76] But others turned to the underworld—to crime, prostitution, and smuggling—with opportunities abounding because of Odessa's international port, which became a hub for trade in contraband as well as human cargo destined for the brothels of South America.[77] One may speculate that settlers' failed expectations of easy riches, coupled with the pervasiveness of crime and decadence typically associated with a cosmopolitan seaport in a balmy frontier region, impelled many to seek material prosperity through illicit means. Consequently the city developed an additional reputation, this one positing Odessa as a land of crime and debauchery, a city of sin where an upstanding citizen would inevitably succumb to the lure of wicked temptation, trapped as he was within "the fires of hell."

The Genesis of the Odessa Myth

The origins of the Odessa myth are tied to what may be called "the Greek connection." Catherine the Great's decision to name her city-child after the Hellenic settlement of Odessos is emblematic of this link, and it imbued Odessa with a mythical past from its very inception. To be sure, Odessa was not unique in this regard; one of Catherine's pet projects was to give New Russia's cities Greek names, such as Sevastopol', Simferopol', and Tavrida, just to name a few.[78] But the connection to Hellenism transcends eighteenth-century trends in Russian nomenclature, and to understand this we must briefly look at the Black Sea region's significance for the ancient Greeks.

When the Greeks first ventured into the region, it lay on the frontier of their known world. During the Homeric era the sea was viewed as ominous, foreboding, and threatening "because of its wintry storms and the ferocity of the tribes that lived around it, particularly the Scythians, in that they sacrificed strangers, ate their flesh, and used their skulls as drinking-cups," wrote Strabo in his *Geography.*[79] Herodotus insisted that the region's inhabitants were among "the most unlearned nations in the world."[80] Navigating the Black Sea was a nightmare because of the sudden appearance of storms, dense fogs, and harsh winds. The Black Sea region was imagined as

a land of violent weather and primitive people, fraught with danger for those bold enough to leave the sanctuary of the Mediterranean and enter this perilous world.

The legacy of Greek thought influenced the impressions of nineteenth-century travelers to the region. Sailing the sea in the 1830s, Charles Elliot did battle with the elements and later wrote that "the ancients had with good reason regarded this sea with alarm; an alarm not altogether unjustifiable even in the present improved state of the science of navigation."[81] During his voyage, John Moore was reminded of the "adventurous mariners . . . [who] were so rash to brave these dangers [and] invariably fell victim to their temerity."[82] Both described the "terror" felt by the Greeks who feared the "giants" and "savages" dwelling on the shores, and although Moore dismissed Greek legends as "ridiculous," these memoirists evoked an atmosphere of dread and exhilaration through such lively accounts.[83] For Edmund Spencer,

> destiny decided that one [storm] of the wildest fury should now threaten our bark with destruction. . . . The sea heaved fearfully, the watery mountains rolled over each other in rapid succession, the fiery lightening darted through the dark, wild clouds accompanied by tremendous peals of thunder, and the howling wind drove our vessel like a feather through a surge; it was, in truth, a glorious spectacle."[84]

The Black Sea may have only covered an area of 422,000 square kilometers—less than one-fifth the size of its neighbor, the Mediterranean—but crossing into New Russia was akin to entering a new and unknown universe.

Reaching Russia's city of gold was a major tribulation, a battle of endurance to overcome seemingly insurmountable impediments of geography and nature, just like the mythical Eldorado of South America, which had eluded Walter Raleigh and other explorers centuries earlier.[85] But unlike the original Eldorado whose existence remained a mystery, travelers were ultimately able to reach Odessa, and their journey through the harsh frontier shaped their experiences and affected how they depicted the city itself.

Nineteenth-century visitors imagined Odessa's emergence as a miraculous event, a triumph over wilderness. Robert Lyall wrote that the city "has risen as if by magic, from the bosom of a desert on the shores of the Black Sea."[86] Another visitor maintained that

> the young and flourishing capital could not be more fitly heralded. Surrounded to a remote distance by immense steppes and endless deserts, Odessa appears before one like a land of promise, a long desired oasis; and its walls are entered with the same feelings of joy as are experienced on reaching port at the end of a long sea voyage.[87]

John Stephens marveled at the power and will it must have taken for Odessa's founders to achieve such a city, as if "a gigantic government, endowed almost with

creative powers says, 'Let there be a city,' and immediately commences the erection of large buildings."[88] Odessa was fabled for the improbability of its magnificence, surrounded as it was by the wilds of the Russian frontier.

For such visitors, Odessa's splendor went hand-in-hand with its aura of European otherness, resembling Mediterranean Italy or Greece, rather than frigid Russia. Henry Wikoff describes his experience:

> I was almost tempted to believe that, by some hocus-pocus, we had tumbled on an Italian town, so balmy was the air, so bright the aspect of the place, with its lofty granite houses, broad streets, rich foliage, and splendid promenade on the borders of the smiling Black Sea, rivaling the Mediterranean in loveliness. . . . After a dinner of a Parisian excellence, we strolled under a genial starry sky in the pretty gardens by the seaside, whose trickling fountains and graceful statuary reminded me every instant of Naples and its adorable climate.[89]

One French engineer who was not, in fact, impressed with Odessa nevertheless understood that "this enthusiasm of the Russians may be easily accounted for: accustomed as they are to their wilderness of snow and mud, Odessa is for them a real Eldorado comprising all the seductions and pleasures of the world."[90]

And Odessa's seductions and earthly pleasures intoxicated scores of visitors. Many pointed out the abundance of fruit and vegetables, sumptuously rich in color and colossal in size. Shirley Brooks was dazzled by the

> mountain chain of melons, in heaps breast high, around whose base roll, in humble subjection, scores of yellow-bellied pumpkins. Apples of every variety, vast and sallow, or smaller and red as sunset lie around you in thousands, filling the air with their aroma. . . . And as for the millions of onions, dried beans, mushrooms hanging in mighty ropes, pears of a noble juiciness and a sturdy flavour, purple plums of great size and excellence, and a hundred other vegetarian idols, it is difficult to imagine how so many can have been brought together.[91]

Merchants of different nationalities filled Odessa with exotic goods from around the world, including "perfumes, shawls, oil, coffee, spices, soap, Turkish tobacco . . . the best attar of roses and balm of Mecca."[92] Aleksandr Pushkin's literary character, Evgenii Onegin, basks in the sea and southern sun of this "beatific land," reveling on the "load of oysters" from Istanbul, and the "thick coffee [which] Orientals prize." "Why repine," Onegin exclaims, "when there's no duty on the wine?"[93] John Moore described how everybody in Odessa smokes "*à la Turque,*" with pipes made from long cherry sticks, amber mouthpieces, and ornamented with enamel, gold, and even precious stones. Like manna falling from heaven, a cornucopia of alluring commodities could be found in Odessa, ready to entice those who made it to this desert oasis.

Odessa's abundance and splendor also implied affluence for its residents, and observers avowed that wealth could be attained through commercial success by everybody who settled there. Commerce flourished immediately with the city's founding; it was the raison d'être of all who came, so that "almost every inhabitant of Odessa had one foot raised, ready to decamp on the first appearance of an interruption to trade."[94] Whereas in 1803 practically everybody went on foot, by 1827 owning a carriage with *only* one horse was the ultimate marker of "humility."[95] The power of commerce brought riches to all Odessans, and it was claimed that one would be hard-pressed to find any poor people.[96] Reminiscing about the Odessa of his youth, one resident maintained that salaries were so great that cabbies would role cigarettes with one ruble and even ten ruble notes.[97] There was literally money to burn and the burgeoning of trade in Odessa brought wealth and amusement to visitors and settlers alike.

Visitors were dazzled by Odessa's people and their culture as much as they were by the city's wealth and abundance. As a land of migrants, Odessa's multiethnic population could be heard speaking "almost every tongue under heaven in the course of a stroll through the port or Custom-house," and the "principal streets are filled with an immense variety of costume."[98] Pushkin's Evgenii Onegin marvels at what

> You hear amid the gay street's fluster
> The golden tongue Italians speak;
> Armenian, Spaniard, Frenchman, Greek,
> Proud Slav and stout Moldavian muster;
> And strolling with the throng you'll view
> Egypt's retired corsair too.[99]

One German visitor insisted that Odessa "has so little of the Russian stamp to it, that it might be supposed to belong to any other nation."[100] One such nation was Italy whose "melodious [*blagozvuchnyi*] golden language" dominated the streets during the first half of the nineteenth century.[101] For foreign settlers, Odessa was "a new motherland, where nothing could threaten one's well-being."[102]

Multiethnicity, commerce, and exotic goods came together in Odessa's markets and bazaars in a stunning spectacle of commodities, clothing, and culture, for "in every throng of people you will run into a confusion of nations—this is Odessa's most distinguishing feature."[103] One traveler contended that "not even in the bazaars of Constantinople will one hear a greater variety of languages among the hundred and fifty thousand people here assembled."[104] For Robert Pinkerton, Odessa itself was, in fact, one gigantic market, a "refuge of nations," consisting of "Russians, French, Italians, Greeks, Armenians, Jews, Germans, Poles, Turks, Tartars, Americans, English . . . all eagerly prosecuting their commercial concerns

in this free city."[105] Ethnic difference was no obstacle for people of all origins coming together in the pursuit of materialistic ends.

Yet ethnic diversity and materialism evoked contention and controversy among Odessa's proponents and its critics. Some believed that the city had a civilizing effect on primitive peoples. Aine Sicard maintained that after a mere five years of living in Odessa, these "Tatars . . . from the Bessarabian deserts" were no longer recognizable—it was as if they were transformed through a fairy's magical powers.[106] But others did not agree, with many coming to see Odessans as avaricious, dissolute, and inclined to criminality. According to Shirley Brooks, it was commonly said that "knaves learn their business at Pera [Turkey], and come to Odessa to practise it."[107] Edward Morton viewed the low moral character of the city's inhabitants through the lens of history, writing that

> the most ancient inhabitants of the country in which the present town of Odessa is situated were a savage nation, known under the general denomination of Scythians. . . . Their manners were rude, cruel, and licentious. Their successors, the inhabitants of modern "New Russia" resemble their ancestors in many respects. They are almost as uncivilized, equally ignorant, surpass them in their vices, and are still clad in sheep-skins.[108]

Baron Filipp Vigel', a minor tsarist official who spent some time in Odessa in the 1820s, insisted that "Odessa's first inhabitants consisted of vagrants [*brodiagi*], people of depravity [*liudi porochnye*], prepared to engage in all sorts of nasty affairs [*durnoe delo*]."[109] Moreover, he continued, "their customs cannot be reformed because of the incessant arrival of similar people."[110] Decadence and immorality manifested itself in Odessa through a rampant quest for earthly gratification. One observer wrote that

> Odessa has the reputation for being a very fast city, one of the most immoral communities in Europe, and the young Russians are given to gambling and dissipation of all kinds. At nights the streets are brilliantly lighted, and are crowded with promenaders of both sexes. . . . All night the air is filled with music and laughter, and pleasure-seekers turn night into day.[111]

Another traveler noted that "the conjugal tie is little regarded" in Odessa and how "women of the highest rank have been known to perform in the theaters . . . [and] the dissipation and immoralities introduced were, it is said, very great."[112]

Odessa's detractors insisted that the city's foreign character was instrumental in making it a profligate and sinful place. At least two visitors avowed that "Odessa became a refuge for the worst members of society of the neighbouring countries."[113] The Greeks, in particular, were often held up as scoundrels of the lowest order. Johann Kohl insisted that "they are known to be the greatest rogues in the world,"

and those in Odessa have mastered the art of insurance scams.[114] According to Baron Vigel', the Greeks of Odessa were "perfidious, malicious, vindictive, unpredictable, haughty, and self-interested even more so than the kikes . . . [committing] despicable frauds everywhere."[115] Even Odessa's governor, Alexander Langeron, after his tenure had ended in the 1820s, wrote to Tsar Nicholas I imploring him to reform Russia's inefficient administrative system in the south, as Odessa's inhabitants were, in general, "the dregs [*otbros*] of Russia and Europe" who had little comprehension of the Empire's laws and customs.[116]

The integrity of Odessans was thus debated: where some saw the pursuit of happiness, others saw debauchery; where some saw enterprising merchants, others saw swindlers. And since Odessa was a port, the question of contraband was an item of burning contention. Odessa's chief architect, Franz de Voland, wrote in his memoirs that Odessa faced little danger from smugglers, with the sea and the surrounding ravines serving as natural barriers against trade in illicit substances.[117] De Voland wrote these words in 1803, perhaps in expectation of the charges that could be leveled against his beloved city. And he may have demonstrated foresight, as twenty-five years later George Jones, a visitor to Russia, claimed that whenever large quantities of contraband flooded the empire "it was immediately said, 'Oh they come from Odessa.'"[118] Odessa had both loyal supporters and staunch opponents who rallied around such issues as crime, vice, avarice, and the moral rectitude of the city's multiethnic and demographically unusual population.

What is clear is that nobody was neutral on Odessa. Some found heaven, others found hell, many found a paradoxical combination of the two. But nearly everybody who contributed to the construction of the Odessa myth imbued their narratives with emotion; with curiosity and wonder; with veneration and revulsion. Odessa was, in short, a city worth talking about and worth elevating to mythical proportions.

Odessa's dualistic nature as gilded and wicked, as simultaneously paradise and hell, as a veritable Garden of Eden with Gomorrah lurking in its shadows, are common attributes of mythical cities of sin. Visitors to San Francisco, Shanghai, and New Orleans during the apex of their commercial and demographic growth described these seaports in similar terms, stressing the affluence, debauchery, and impudence of their people. One journalist who spent some time in California during the mid-nineteenth century insisted that

> San Franciscans will not yield the palm of superiority to anything to be found elsewhere in the world. Speak of the deeper depth, the lower hell, the maelstrom of vice and iniquity—from whence those who once fairly enter escape no more forever—and they will point triumphantly to the Barbary Coast, strewn from end to end with the wrecks of humanity, and challenge you to match it anywhere outside of the lake of fire and brimstone.[119]

The earliest incarnations of the Odessa myth followed a discursive blueprint that was characteristic for representations of all such cities. Accordingly, the Odessa myth would not be unique, if this is all there was to it. But in the mid-nineteenth century the myth took on another dimension, one that transformed the *way* in which it was articulated, rather than the articulated message itself. And this transformation was linked to the coming of the Jews.

The Jews and the Odessa Myth

Jewish participation in the construction of the Odessa myth can be traced to the Haskalah. Odessa became an important maskilic center in the 1850s, and much like their counterparts elsewhere in Russia and Germany, Odessa's maskilim sought to modernize Jewish society, religion, and culture through education and communal reform.[120] Believing that the reformist government of Tsar Alexander II had the power and the will to help realize such a transformation, Jewish intellectuals in Russia publicized their objectives through the printed word and personal appeals to various officials at court.[121] Odessa's maskilim, however, believed they had something special to offer, positing that *their* Jewish community was unique among Russian Jewish communities, as it was already in the vanguard of the modernization drive. They showcased the Jews of Odessa, presenting them as secular, rational, industrious, and learned, a sociological product of an enlightened regime in an economically flourishing city.

A typical text of this maskilic project is Joachim Tarnopol's *Notes on the History and Character of Odessa's Jews,* published in 1855.[122] Tarnopol, a merchant from Odessa, argued that Odessa's Jews were different primarily because of geography. Odessa "is bathed in the waters of the Black Sea," which has served as a conduit for cosmopolitanism, a gateway for the entry of European intellectual stimulus, and a vehicle for financial success.[123] An amalgam of settlers from different parts of Russia as well as from abroad, Odessa's embryonic Jewish community coalesced and "regenerated itself," abandoning religion and "oriental isolation," in favor of the world of commerce—a "modern divinity" that has made Odessa's Jews into useful and productive members of society.[124] Odessa's Jewish community should thus serve as a model for Imperial Russia's destitute shtetl Jews, who could also be remade through a secular education and business opportunities, under the guiding hands of a progressive monarch and a modern intelligentsia.

Tarnopol's conception of the "Odessan Jew" is not incompatible with the budding myth of Odessa insofar as it suggests that the city itself possessed a transformative power that allowed settlers to remake themselves through commerce and cosmopolitanism. Becoming Odessan meant becoming someone capable of overcoming his backward origins by prospering in Russia's gilded city whose gold rubbed off on everyone it touched. Odessa was magical, and Tarnopol held up

his people to prove it.[125] Yet Tarnopol's conception of Odessa is incomplete, as it fails to capture Odessa's dualistic nature as both heaven and hell, as a land of commercial tycoons but also one of rogues and deviants where success could go hand-in-hand with sin rather than virtue. Of course, Tarnopol's take on the city and its Jews is not surprising given the Haskalah's agenda for reform; showcasing crime and immorality would hardly win him supporters at the Imperial court. It is thus remarkable and perhaps ironic that a more characteristic representation of Odessa did, in fact, emerge from the Haskalah as well, from a man named Osip Rabinovich, author, publicist, and close collaborator of Tarnopol's.

Osip Rabinovich was born in Poltava Province, receiving both a secular and religious education. After settling Odessa in 1845, he became a successful notary whose clients included the city's leading Jewish commercial firms. By the end of the decade he started writing fiction, publishing short stories about roguish Jewish businessmen, including "Morits Sefardi," whose main character bears the distinction of being the first of many Odessan Jewish swindlers to appear in literature. By 1860 Rabinovich had branched out into nonfiction, campaigning for the reform of the Jewish community. Along with Tarnopol, he founded *Rassvet,* the first Russian-language Jewish newspaper in the empire, whose agenda was maskilic, mirroring the objectives and content of Tarnopol's earlier work. But unlike Tarnopol, Rabinovich diverged from the mold of the Haskalah in many of his writings by inscribing the Jews into the nascent myth of Odessa in all its facets.[126]

In an article published in the third issue of *Rassvet,* Rabinovich likened the birth of Odessa to that of California, another frontier region designated as "Eldorado" at that very moment.[127] "In Odessa," Rabinovich argued,

> like in San Francisco, an incessant throng of people from all corners of the world came together in search of happiness. In both places, the nascent community consisted of an assemblage of bachelors who had come to scoop up gold by the handful; living on the fly, they acknowledged no constraints on their activities to achieve their boundless wishes. . . . They thronged into Odessa from Little Russia, Lithuania, Podoliia, Volyn, Poland; there were even Jewish settlers from England, Italy, and other European countries. This motley mixture . . . broke free from the suffocating atmosphere of the shtetls and finding themselves amidst the freedom of this new Eldorado let all their eccentricities come out.[128]

Diversity, for Rabinovich, was the essence of Odessa; it was "a city of specimens" (*gorod obrazchikov*), which contained people of all sorts: educated scholars, incomparable merchants, skillful brokers, desperate speculators (*otchaiannye afferisty*), inveterate rogues (*ot´iavlennye pluty*), and out-and-out dandies (*franty*) who prided themselves on not knowing a single word of Russian yet saw themselves as

intellectual aristocrats. People of all sorts came to Odessa, but the city itself could also transform those who came. Rabinovich went on to describe how thrifty and modest gentlemen would arrive in Odessa and abandon themselves to the opera, cards, and Turkish tobacco. "The fires of hell" (*geenna*) encircled Odessa, according to those who kept away from this land of ill repute, deriding the city for all these reasons.[129]

Rabinovich, however, neither condemned nor ridiculed the less upstanding members of Odessa's community, suggesting that even the buffoonish dandies, dedicated swindlers, and cardsharps played a critical role in shaping the city's character. He celebrated the fact that Odessa was in complete "chaos, seething and bubbling in expectation of a creative wind that would have brought quiet and order." Things had since quieted down, according to Rabinovich, but he extolled these good old days (*dobroe staroe vremia*) for having made Odessa into the unique city that it was.[130]

Written in 1860, Rabinovich's article marked an important shift in the evolution of the Odessa myth. First, he constructed a hybrid representation of the city and its people, one that stressed commercial success, intellectual achievement, *and* criminality, suggesting that all these elements were emblematic of Odessa; creativity and decadence coexisted and were perhaps inextricably linked in making Odessa into Eldorado. Moreover, all these characteristics *should* be celebrated even if outsiders denounced the city as deviant. Second, Rabinovich implicitly redefined Odessa as a Jewish city. Diversity for Rabinovich was Jewish diversity: settlers came from "all corners of the world," but those corners were largely shtetls; intellectuals, businessmen, tricksters, and thieves gave Odessa its color and variety, but the tint was strikingly Jewish; and the war of words between Odessa's supporters and its detractors was a battle between maskilim and their Orthodox nemeses, Hasidic or otherwise. Rabinovich's essay was a pivotal step in adding a Jewish layer to the Odessa myth, whose production would flourish in the twentieth century, surviving the Russian Revolution and then the collapse of the USSR.

The reconstruction of Odessa as a Jewish city of sin during this era did not cease with Rabinovich's essay. In fact, it was fiction rather than maskilic texts and didactic pamphlets that set the contours and substance of the unfolding myth. Jewish authors, writing in both Russian and Yiddish, created a handful of short stories and novels similar in plot, tone, language, and humor whose depiction of Odessa would later become canonical. Osip Rabinovich was one such writer, though his stories have largely been forgotten. But his two successors, Sholem Abramovich (writing under the pen name Mendele Mokher Sforim) and Sholem Aleichem, are still read today. These authors crafted tales that chronicled the travels of the shtetl Jews to Odessa, humorously recounting how with curiosity and fascination the newcomers took in the seductive charms of this mysterious world;

how they sought to carve out a place for themselves in this frenetically paced city of affluence and danger; and how they all abandoned Odessa after failing to strike the gold they had imagined was rolling in the streets. Through the eyes of the shtetl Jew we get a representation of Odessa that is both exotic and Jewish.

The first Jewish literary traveler to Odessa, however, was actually not a shtetl Jew at all, though he is significant because he is a forerunner to the rogues and swindlers subsequently popularized by Semen Iushkevich, Isaac Babel, Il'ia Il'f, and Evgenii Petrov. The swindler in question is Osip Rabinovich's Morits Sefardi, a narcissistic and unscrupulous businessman who comes to Odessa from Leipzig during the mid-nineteenth century to enrich himself by working in a Greek brokerage firm. But fortuity gives him the chance to cheat his employer, gaining insider information on a lucrative commercial opportunity. With prosperity smiling on Sefardi, he opens his own firm, moves into a luxurious apartment, and breaks off his engagement to the daughter of a humble watchmaker in order to pursue the wealthy Sarah Gol'dman. He does not succeed, however, in his romantic quest and ultimately becomes despondent, thinking his existence is meaningless.[131]

Sefardi's Odessa is a land of glitter and rapacity without soul. People are fueled by commerce, and their social milieu—the city's lavish clubs and cafés—is consumed with business discussions taking place in "all the possible languages" of the world.[132] Bettering oneself is simply a matter of moving into an apartment of "elegance and luxury" (*iziashchestvo i roskosh'*).[133] Sefardi sees himself as being a typical Odessan, thriving in an environment appropriate for a man of his caliber. But his business victim brands Sefardi a "demon" sent to destroy him, and, in a slight variation on the standard adage, the father of Sefardi's jilted fiancée insists that "the fires of Gehenna" encircle Sefardi himself.[134] With Morits Sefardi, the Jewish swindler established Odessa as his home, an ideal venue to create the elaborate schemes and the chic lifestyle for which the city became notorious.

Morits Sefardi, however, lacked the charm and the humor for which Odessa also became famous. It was rather another story by Osip Rabinovich that wittily captured the archetypal shtetl Jew—a hapless schlimazel who lived with his head in the stars, fantasizing about success but never achieving it, yearning to be a Rothschild but ultimately remaining the Jewish version of a country bumpkin—and his encounter with Odessa. Sholem Aleichem later made this shtetl Jew famous through such characters as Tevye the Dairyman and Menakhem-Mendl. But Rabinovich's "Story of how Reb Khaim-Shulim Feige Traveled from Kishinev to Odessa and What Happened to Him" came first, in 1860, and its protagonist went searching for Eldorado several decades before Mendele Mokher Sforim's Fishke the Lame and Sholem Aleichem's Menakhem-Mendl undertook similar journeys.[135]

Three shtetl Jews sojourned in Odessa in search of a better life, having heard the legends of Russia's Eldorado. Rabinovich's Reb Khaim-Shulim was tired of

his humdrum existence in Kishinev: "on one side we have the sky, the ground, and green grass—utterly boring; on the other side—green grass, the sky, and the ground—what tedium, what emptiness."[136] Arriving in Odessa, Khaim-Shulim runs around thunderstruck by all the glorious sights, marveling at the port, containing "real ships," which he had never seen before; the great sea, consisting of "bitter water," which he had never tasted before; and the bazaars, which were full of "the most exalted trade" (*torgovlia znatnaia*), which he had never experienced before.[137] Odessa's mellifluous sounds dazzle Khaim-Shulim as much as the wonders that he sees. He waxes eloquent on the "Odessan language" (*odesskii iazyk*), which is "sweeter than honey . . . flowing and slippery like olive oil with a slight aroma of orange peel."[138]

Sholem Aleichem's Menakhem-Mendl is similarly captivated by Odessa, convinced that he will have a share in the opulence that surrounds him in less than the blink of an eye. In a state of ecstasy he writes to his wife about "the grandeur and beauty of the city of Odessa, the fine character of its inhabitants, and the wonderful opportunities that exist here."[139] Commerce is at the root of all the splendor he sees:

> Just imagine: I take my walking stick and venture out on Greek Street, as the place where Jews do business is called, and there are twenty thousand different things to deal in. If I want wheat, there's wheat. If I feel like wool, there's wool. If I'm in the mood for bran, there's bran. Flour, salt, feathers, raisins, jute, herring—name it and you have it in Odessa. . . . I tell you, my dearest, the streets of Odessa are paved with gold! [*es volgert zikh da gold in di gasn!*] I don't regret for a moment having come here.[140]

Like Khaim-Shulim, Menakhem-Mendl feels as if he has been transported to another universe, and like an enraptured child who has been given free reign in a candy store, he is overcome by such an exhilarating environment.

Fishke the Lame's encounter with Odessa is somewhat different, insofar as he is a beggar whose Weltanschauung is shaped by his limited experiences in his backwater of a hometown, called "Glupsk" (Russian for "stupidity"). Nevertheless he, too, is in awe of Odessa's abundance and diversity:

> I found all the beggars I wanted! Armies of them, and of all different kinds—beggars with sacks and beggars without sacks—types you could find only in Odessa and nowhere else. There were Jerusalem Jews and Frankish, Turkish, and Persian Jews who babbled away in the Holy Tongue; there were old paupers with their wives, and also without their wives, who claimed they were on their way to Jerusalem to die, but, in the meanwhile, stayed on in Odessa, had more children, and thought the

> world owed them a living; there were wives whose husbands had deserted them; there were women with spasms and men with fits who came here for a cure at the shore; there were Cabbalists of the old homey sort who used to loaf in the houses of study; then there were the new-fangled Cabbalists with shaven faces who used to loaf in the cafés and taverns together with the Galicians and Frenchmen; there were refined beggars without a groschen to their name who dressed like rich men; and there were others who even owned their own houses but dressed in rags and tatters like the poorest of the poor.[141]

In Fishke's vision of the world everyone may be a "beggar," but those in Odessa have a certain flare, refinement, and even a measure of wealth that one could not find in his lackluster and homogeneous Glupsk.

Abundant food, exotic delicacies, and various intoxicants also tempt the shtetl Jew, as he makes his way through Odessa. Khaim-Shulim excessively indulges in white Jamaican rum with his new "friends," local con artists who subsequently swindle their naïve guest out of his money. Menakhem-Mendl is taken by the profusion and immoderate consumption of fruit in Odessa, a rare luxury in his native town of Kasrilevke. He is shocked that "people eat grapes in the street, not just once a year for Rosh Hashanah like Kasrilevkans. They're not embarrassed to do it."[142] Yet Menakhem-Mendl succumbs to his own cravings, gorging on ice cream at the stylish Café Fankoni, though the schlimazel from the shtetl has little choice in the matter, as overindulgence is an inseparable part of commercial success in Odessa:

> By now they know me in every brokerage. I take my seat at Fanconi's with all the dealers, pull up a chair at a marble table, and ask for a dish of ice cream. That's our Odessa custom: you sit down and a waiter in a frock coat asks you to ask for ice cream. Well, you can't be a piker—and when you're finished, you're asked to ask for more. If you don't, you're out a table and in the street.[143]

Fishke the Lame likens the entire city to a narcotic of sorts, insisting that "Odessa is like one of those tricky little snuff boxes—you have to find the catch. Once you know that it opens easily, you can stick your fingers in and take a pinch whenever you want to."[144]

But the shtetl Jew is ultimately shocked by the state of Judaism in Odessa, encountering a population concerned with material ends at the expense of traditional values. Fishke the Lame reacts with astonishment to the prevalence of Jewish merrymaking in the local saloons:

> There is always excitement in Odessa; something is always happening! The air whistles and screeches. Walk by a tavern, and there's always a

> drunkard at the open door, groaning and singing "Pretty Maiden"—that's a song of theirs there. Across the table from him, happy, tipsy Jews sing psalms and prayers to merry marching tunes![145]

Judaic practices are eroded in such images—not rejected outright—but transformed to suit the needs of a modernizing community seeking earthly gratification rather than divine redemption. Sholem Aleichem's Menakhem-Mendl is likewise amazed:

> This town is so rich, and its Jews so busy getting richer, that no one thinks about Sabbaths or Jewish holidays. . . . The Odessa synagogue is something to see. It's called the Choir Synagogue and everyone wears a top hat and sits on all sides of the cantor. His name is Pini and he can sing, even if he doesn't have a beard! . . . I tell you, they could sell tickets! And the choir boys wear the cutest little prayer shawls. . . . Don't ask me why the local Jews stay away. Even those who come don't pray. They sit chewing their cud in their little prayer shawls and ritzy top hats and—shhhh, not a sound! Try praying loud enough for God to hear and a beadle comes over and tells you to hush. I never saw such weird Jews in my life.[146]

Fishke the Lame similarly describes how Jews dance with the Holy Torah on inappropriate occasions and that "the rabbi himself led the dance in a French suit with a trimmed beard."[147] Revelry has overtaken the synagogue and prayer has resurfaced in the tavern. Shawls and beards have shriveled up into mere remnants of their former grandeur. Traditional Judaism has withered away to make room for fashionable clothing and other marks of acculturation and secularism.

Osip Rabinovich, Sholem Aleichem, and Mendele Mokher Sforim all portray the duality of Odessa as both gilded and wicked, a city whose allure could equally attract and repulse, through the juxtaposition of different characters in their texts. Khaim-Shulim, Fishke, and Menakhem-Mendl each have foils who counter and invert every positive assessment of Odessa, discursively transforming the city from paradise to hell. Khaim-Shulim's wife, Meni-Kroina, is convinced that her husband is neglecting his prayers, caught up in some sort of intrigue. "This city," she howls, "this city, a plague [*iazva*] upon our whole country! It's with good reason that our Benderskii Tsadik avowed that he would sooner give up fish for twelve successive Sabbaths than eat Odessan steer."[148] Meni-Kroina thus breaks down, fearing for her husband's safety and future, trapped as he is within the clutches of dark temptation.

Fishke the Lame, on the other hand, slams Odessa himself after meeting up with his friend Yontl, who, also disabled, came to Odessa somewhat earlier. Fishke cannot understand how

> Yontl took it into his head to make me admire his Odessa. He showed me the beautiful streets and boasted about the beautiful houses, as if they

> belonged to him and gave him profit. Every time he showed me something, he looked at me with pride and snorted with pleasure, as though this wealthy house or that pretty street made him more important in my eyes. He would poke me and say, "Nu, Fishke! What do you say about my Odessa? Maybe in your Glupsk you have something like this, eh?"[149]

Fishke does not buy into Yontl's fixation on Odessa's glitter and he tries to disenchant his awestruck companion:

> What do you want me to say, Yontl? Odessa is a beautiful city, but it's a pity that there are no mentshn here! Tell me yourself, Yontl, are those people out there on the Boulevard mentshn? Just look at the men holding the ladies' hands! It's a sin just to look! Jews with shaven faces! Jewish women with their own hair—sweeping the street with their long trailing dresses which are cut so low in front that you can see their bosoms. Feh, it's disgusting, as I am a Jew! Akh, if we could bring our Jews from Glupsk here! Then this would be a city, a Jewish city, with Jewish customs, and things would be as they should be. . . . No wonder people say that you can see the flames of hell forty versts around Odessa [*Az di velt zagt, fertsig verst arum Ades brengt der gehenem*]! There must be some truth to it.[150]

Still Yontl persists in his convictions, avowing that he would "rather be here in hell than back in the Garden of Eden of your Glupsk!"[151] Odessa could stir up controversy between two erstwhile compatriots, whose friendship is torn asunder by Russia's Eldorado and the notorious place that the Jews found within it.

Odessa's most vociferous detractor among the nineteenth century's literary Jews, however, is Menakhem-Mendl's wife, Sheyne-Sheyndl, who launches an incessant campaign of verbal invectives against the city of sin. Responding to each of her husband's letters home, Sheyne-Sheyndl decimates Odessa through the timeless art of Yiddish cursing.[152] She starts off mildly by wishing "Odessa and its market had my toothache!" but quickly raises the pitch of her slurs by yearning for "Odessa [to] burn to the ground" (*es zol oyf dem kumen a sreyfe*).[153] Sheyne-Sheyndl's letters are filled, in fact, with images of Odessa being consumed by fire and pestilence. She rejects her husband's invitation to join him, insisting that she will "see Odessa in flames first!"; she pleads with her husband to run for his life, wishing "a cholera upon Odessa"; and in her most graphic expletive Sheyne-Sheyndl declares that Odessa should "burn and be burned down, broil and scorch, may there not remain a single remnant or survivor" (*un es zol brenen un flakern, sarfen un farsarfet vert, es zol fun dem nit blaybn keyn sored upolet*).[154] Much like Sodom and Gomorrah, Odessa is consigned to the fires of Gehenna for having seduced Sheyne-Sheyndl's husband, where he "lives like God . . . and bathes in the sea to music."[155]

Like Osip Rabinovich's essay, "Odessa," these stories represent Odessa as a Jewish city. It may be a unique landscape whose people appear to have been

transformed into an exotic community, with habits and customs that bear scant resemblance to those practiced in Glupsk, Kasrilevke, and Kishinev, but it is ultimately a Jewish landscape. Gentiles are few and far between, and the controversial issues with which Fishke, Menakhem-Mendl, and Khaim-Shulim grapple are largely framed within a maskilic discourse. Economic transformation, cultural reform, secularization, and dissipation were certainly not problems unique to the Jews, but these authors used Odessa as a vehicle for presenting such issues within the particularistic framework of a modernizing Russian Jewry, with synagogues giving way to saloons and gefilte fish giving way to Jamaican Rum. Yet the Jewishness of Odessa as it is mythologized in these stories transcends mere subject matter, as they are told through the prism of Jewish humor and cultural tropes, with characters who speak, behave, and imagine the world around them in a uniquely Jewish manner. And it is precisely here that we see the crucial contribution made by Russian Jewry to the myth of old Odessa.

Khaim-Shulim and Menakhem-Mendl are both archetypal schlimazels. They are classic *luftmentshn*—people who live on air—having no luck in their business ventures but never giving up hope that tomorrow may bring them their much coveted success. Khaim-Shulim dreamt of being a musician, yearning to play the cymbals, but his family prohibited it, because all musicians "worship the devil" and such a profession would "defile the family name" (*oskverit ves´ ikh iikhes*).[156] With that avenue effectively closed, Khaim-Shulim became an unsuccessful watch repairman, perpetually pawning his clients' watches to keep his business afloat. In marriage he is emasculated by his sharp-tongued wife, and despite their affection for each other, he lives in fear of her putting her curses into action.

Odessa devours Khaim-Shulim and Menakhem-Mendl as a consequence of their naïveté, unable to grasp quickly enough that Odessa is a city of smooth-talking rogues, whose words that are "sweeter than honey" are really an instrument for entrapping hapless Jews searching for wealth. Menakhem-Mendl ultimately abandons the gilded city, having had his "fill of Odessa and its market and its Fanconi's and its petty thieves," but he keeps his smile, his humor, and his endearing faith in his "brilliant" ideas.[157] Characteristically he heads off to America after his many mishaps in Eastern Europe, because "the streets, they say, are paved with gold, and money is dished out by the plateful," not even realizing that he is repeating verbatim his earlier vision of Odessa, and once again ignoring Sheyne-Sheyndl's consternation and anger.[158]

Sheyne-Sheyndl is as stereotypically Jewish as her gallivanting husband, for she possesses a masterful talent for both cursing and kvetching. She incessantly tries to shame Menakhem-Mendl into returning, graphically describing how she languishes in Kasrilevke "lying on her deathbed" with their children "who have come down with every illness there is—their teeth, their throats, their stomachs, the whooping cough, diphtheria, all kinds of horrors I could wish on more deserving people."[159]

When shaming him proves to be an ineffective weapon in getting Menakhem-Mendl to return home and assume his familial responsibilities, she lashes out, turning his own words against him: "You say you're going like a house afire, Mendl? Why don't you jump into the flames! I wouldn't come see you in Boiberik if you were on your deathbed!"[160] In line with a popular nineteenth-century Yiddish proverb—"God protect us from Gentile hands and Jewish tongues" (*Got zol op'hitn fun goyishe hent un yidishe reyd*), Sheyne-Sheyndl epitomizes the linguistic dexterity reputedly possessed and "mass weaponized" by the Jews of Eastern Europe.[161]

Like Sholem Aleichem's Menakhem-Mendl tales, Osip Rabinovich's story is replete with Jewish humor and linguistic patterns but with one fundamental difference: whereas Sholem Aleichem and Mendele wrote in Yiddish, Rabinovich wrote in Russian, but in a heavily Yiddish-inflected Russian, capturing Jewishness (or, better yet, *Yiddishkeit*) much as Phillip Roth, Jackie Mason, and Mel Brooks would later do with American English. We can see Jewishness, for instance, in the relentless bickering between Khaim-Shulim and his wife. Meni-Kroina constantly curses her husband à la Sheyne-Sheyndl, but in what may be called Judeo-Russian. After one quarrel Meni-Kroina rebuffs her husband's attempt to reconcile, telling him to "go make peace with a fever . . . go and kiss the angel of death," using the Yiddish *malekhamoves* to get her point across.[162] Yiddish-style invectives abound in their household, but in Russianized form: "Look here, I should not spit in your face!" (*Smotri, chtob ia tebe ne pliunula v rozhu!*); "You are a rotten housewife, may God deliver me from you quickly!" (*Ty khoziaika driannaia, chtob G-spod´ izbavil menia ot tebia poskorei!*).[163] Harsh words they may be, but in such Jewish households they rarely translate into action, and amid all the squabbling, Khaim-Shulim and Meni-Kroina ultimately love each other.

Writing in 1860, Osip Rabinovich was thus a pioneer in introducing Yiddish syntax and intonations into Russian literature, a trend later continued by Odessa's prominent cultural figures in the twentieth century, including Isaac Babel, Il'ia Il'f, Leonid Utesov, and Mikhail Zhvanetskii. And although few people read Osip Rabinovich today, his contribution to the Odessa myth has a significance that goes beyond that of the influential works of Sholem Aleichem and Mendele. With few exceptions, Odessa's foremost authors, musicians, and comedians—who were predominantly Jewish—produced their work in Russian, not Yiddish, but it was a Russian heavily inflected with Yiddishisms, Jewish humor, and Jewish cultural motifs, inventing, as mentioned above, the "Odessan language." That Osip Rabinovich was writing in an embryonic form of *odesskii iazyk* several decades *before* the fathers of Yiddish literature produced their Odessa-centered tales makes his role as a progenitor of the Odessa myth all the more remarkable.

Through the writings of these authors, Odessa, "the city of gold and sin," was reconfigured as Odessa, "the shtetl of gold and sin." Odessa was a shtetl but not in terms of demography, religious practices, or commerce; socioeconomic data

suggest that Odessa was a new type of city and, accordingly, a new type of experience for the Jews who came to settle on Russia's southern frontier. In this sense, John Klier is correct in labeling Odessa an "anti-shtetl."[164] But such a conclusion belies the significant cultural aspect of Odessan Jewry. These Russian and Yiddish writers brought what may be called "shtetl culture"—language, humor, and folkloric archetypes—to this city, merging it with the already unfolding Odessa myth. After 1905 a new generation of mythmakers would pick up these cultural tropes and enrich them through newspapers, anecdotes, literature, and music, thereby ensuring that the notoriety of Russia's Eldorado would reach a much wider audience, and that for decades to come Odessa would be read as a Jewish city.

Odessa before the Archetypal "Odessit"

The nineteenth-century mythmakers who imagined and described old Odessa had one important element in common: they were all, with few exceptions, sojourners in Odessa, not native to the region. This applies to the European memoirists, tsarist officials, and the Jewish literary characters who came in search of the paradise rumored to be there. They were outsiders gazing at what was allegedly a new and exotic community burgeoning on new and exotic Russian territory. Edward Morton, Shirley Brooks, Baron Vigel, and Menakhem-Mendl were not Odessans and made no claim to being Odessan. Like much of the city itself, the myth of old Odessa was initially built by foreigners. It would only be in the next period, after the turn of the twentieth century, that we have an indigenous class of mythmakers and, of equal importance, an indigenous class of literary characters who profess to be true Odessans (*nastoiashchie odessity*). And as we shall see in the following chapters, many—if not most—of these Odessans were either of Jewish descent or they exhibited obvious markers of Jewishness in their humor, speech, and mannerisms.

At the Dawn of the Twentieth Century

By the turn of the twentieth century, the principal tenets of the myth of old Odessa had been laid out. Odessa was imagined as a frontier seaport on the exotic waters of the Black Sea, where a yearning for wealth and sensuous pleasure attracted multitudes from around the world. Succumbing to the dark temptations rampant in this city of sin, seekers of gold were ensnared by the city's revelry and dissipation. Odessa was marked as both paradise and hell on earth by those who came and also by those who refused to come out of contempt and fear. Two nineteenth-century Yiddish expressions capture the city's Manichean duality as the Garden of Eden and Gomorrah: "to live like God in Odessa" and "the fires of hell encircle Odessa." Both adages may have been used by the same mythmaker whose failed quest for Eldorado left him philandering in the taverns and brothels

rather than earning rubles at port and mingling with high society in the modish restaurants and cafés.

Such visions of old Odessa are mythical rather than a precise reflection of social reality, not because these mythmakers invented what they purported to see on the way to Odessa and within the city itself. Rather, they came to Russia's Eldorado with preconceived ideas of the region, and with certain objectives and expectations of what they *should* find there. Such factors had a profound influence on the *way* these authors subsequently described Odessa and, whether consciously or not, they added layer upon layer to the evolving myth, so that by the end of the nineteenth century, we have a coherent narrative of Odessa as a fabled city.

This is not to say that Odessa's reality did not play a critical role in shaping the city's myth. Odessa's demographic and economic growth during its first hundred years was indeed remarkable. It was a veritable boomtown for much of the century and thousands did come in search of wealth, adventure seekers who rejected the traditional communities from which they came. Odessa's ethnic makeup was also uncharacteristic for a Russian city of this era, and a dizzying array of diverse peoples all had a visible impact on the city's landscape, both physical and cultural. There was also widespread poverty and crime in Odessa, just as in most large modernizing cities. But in Odessa this may have seemed more glaring than elsewhere, given the city's reputation for opulence and given that masses of destitute people flocked to Odessa because of this very reputation. A traveler could *not* come to Odessa during the nineteenth century and *not* notice such things; there certainly were Italian restaurants, rich Greek entrepreneurs, a beautiful but tempestuous sea, along with Jewish thieves and prostitutes who thrived on the merchants, sailors, and naïve settlers seeking Eldorado in the city's crowded bazaars and cafés. This reality influenced Odessa's mythmakers, serving as the raw material from which they crafted their stories of old Odessa.

CHAPTER 2 *Crafting Old Odessa*

In 1911 the Russian humorist Arkadii Averchenko published a description of his recent journey by steamship to Odessa. Having never visited Odessa before, Averchenko struck up a conversation with a fellow passenger, as he wanted to hear all about the city from an authentic "Odessan" (*odessit*). Averchenko relates the following dialogue:

> "Excuse me," I said turning to him, "are you an Odessan?"
>
> "Why would you think such a thing? Perhaps I stole your hat and put it on instead of my own?"
>
> "Uh, of course not, what are you talking about?"
>
> "Perhaps you think," he asked with alarm, "that I surreptitiously slipped your cigarette case into my pocket?"
>
> "What are you talking about? Cigarette case? I'm just asking if you are from there?"
>
> "Really, that's it? Well, then, yeah, I'm an Odessan."
>
> "Is it a nice city—Odessa?"
>
> "You've never been there?"
>
> "I'm going there for the first time."
>
> "Hmm . . . You look like you must be thirty years old. What have you been doing all these years that you haven't seen Odessa?"

Averchenko's shipmate then went on to describe how Odessa had the most beautiful streets in Russia, the best theater, the most talented actors, the beer, the restaurants, the climate, and everything else that could exhibit Odessa as Russia's magical seaside paradise. When Averchenko asked whether Odessa's women were pretty, his shipmate gravely threw his arms into the air and hung his head in a great show of pity, making it clear that such ignorance about Odessa was utterly unacceptable.[1]

Averchenko's conversation with an "authentic Odessan" did not turn out to be the congenial tête-à-tête he had envisioned, and readers could not possibly fail to notice that the author ascertained next to naught about the city he was nearing. Readers also learn nothing about the Odessit himself—his career, his ethnic background, or his religion. Yet despite the paucity of substantive details in this

passage, much can be gleaned from the speech and mannerisms of the Odessan. Averchenko was, in fact, able to capture the Odessa myth in all its complexity and texture, suggesting a city that was opulent, criminal, and, in an important sense, Jewish in character.

If the nineteenth century marked the birth of the Odessa myth, then the first two decades of the twentieth century were the myth's coming of age. As Imperial Russia entered its twilight years with the tsarist regime succumbing to revolution, war, and more revolution, the development of the Odessa myth headed in the opposite direction. The publication of newspapers, novels, short stories, memoirs, and collections of anecdotes in Odessa and about Odessa exploded after the 1905 Revolution with more mythmaking material being produced in these years than in the entire nineteenth century. The myth of Odessa now reached a much wider audience than before, as the rise of the Penny Press meant cheap newsprint for all who were interested. Well-known writers also increasingly turned their attention to Odessa; Arkadii Averchenko was now joined by the likes of Vlas Doroshevich and Aleksandr Kuprin.

Aside from its reproduction, the myth's content was further enriched through the expansion of the themes that had first appeared in the previous century. Concepts such as the Odessit who was portrayed as a unique and deviant character, and the "Odessan language" (*odesskii iazyk*) whose character was equally deviant and unique, became explicit, further cementing the city's reputation as both exotic and sinful. Most significant, the story of old Odessa became indelibly Jewish during this period. The mythmakers of late imperial and revolutionary Russia adopted the humor, folkloric archetypes, and cultural tropes of the "shtetl culture" first brought to the myth by Sholem Aleichem, Osip Rabinovich, and other nineteenth-century Jewish writers. The wicked gilded city was now a Jewish city, but one that was also exceptionally funny. Smooth-talking swindlers and wild musicians all retained traces of the schlemiels and schlimazels who had left Kishinev, Kasrilevke, and Glupsk for Odessa. And even amid revolution, war, and rising crime, Odessa's thieves and pimps remained a laughing matter. Odessa joked its way through the Revolution and the civil war, refusing to let tragedy and social upheaval consume the wit and irony that had made it the gilded city of rogues and schnorrers.

Twentieth-Century Turmoil

Odessa entered the twentieth century as Russia's fourth-largest city, with a population of 450,000, a number that continued to grow through World War I.[2] The city was ethnically heterogeneous, composed predominantly of Russians (over 50 percent) and Jews (approximately 33 percent). The remainder of the populace consisted of dozens of other groups, including Poles, Germans, Greeks, and Ukrainians.[3] In economic terms, Odessa was no longer achieving the astronomical

growth rates of the first half of the nineteenth century, but the bustle of trade still filled Odessa's port, even though other cities such as Nikolaev were quickly catching up. Industrialization had also begun in Odessa. Factories sprang up, though on a much smaller and less diverse scale than in St. Petersburg, with industrial enterprises in Odessa generally geared toward serving the city's commercial needs.[4] Migrants continued to stream in, searching for work, even if it meant the assembly line rather than the export of grain. And like the empire's other large cities, Odessa experienced all the pangs of modernization with unemployment, housing shortages, and labor unrest boiling under the surface and erupting at critical junctures, as in 1905 when the first Russian Revolution came to Odessa.

The Revolution of 1905 in Odessa, however, had certain characteristics that made it distinct compared to the upheavals in the capitals, as there was a marked ethnic dimension to the events, culminating in the largest pogrom that had ever occurred in Imperial Russia.[5] In general, interethnic relations were better in Odessa than elsewhere, with Jews and Gentiles interacting daily in the workforce and on the streets to a much greater extent than in many of the cities and towns of the Pale of Settlement.[6] Nevertheless, Jews and Gentiles tended to live in separate neighborhoods, with the former populating the Moldavanka District and the Slavic factory workers settling in the Peresyp and Slobodka-Romanovka neighborhoods. A propensity for segregation characterized the shop floor as well: whereas workers in large factories were generally Russians and Ukrainians, Jews tended to work in smaller enterprises, particularly in those owned by other Jews.[7] Although an uneasy harmony predominated most of the time, tensions occasionally erupted into violence, with the Jews the primary target.

Pogroms had sporadically taken place in Odessa throughout the nineteenth century, first in 1821 and then followed by others in 1849, 1859, 1871, and 1881. Such violent incidents, as most historians argue today, were largely the product of frictions unleashed by modernization, not a resurgence of medieval anti-Semitism and Judeophobia.[8] But the Odessa pogrom of October 1905 eclipsed all the earlier ones in Odessa and in the Russian Empire as a whole because of its scale, with over five hundred dead, three hundred injured, and sixteen hundred homes and businesses sustaining damages.[9] Labor unrest and political turbulence meant mobilized workers in the street, and the prominence of the Jews both among the city's wealthy merchants and revolutionary activists meant that angry mobs of Gentiles could easily turn against the Jews. This is precisely what happened in 1905, in the days after Tsar Nicholas II conceded to the Revolution by promulgating the October Manifesto.[10]

Revolution and pogroms, however, were not the only realms of turmoil and violence in Odessa, as widespread criminal activity had become a daily reality by the turn of the twentieth century. Crime, of course, was hardly unique to Odessa;

urbanization and industrialization coupled with poverty and urban squalor meant increased robberies, prostitution, and murders throughout Imperial Russia, to say nothing of Europe and North America.[11] But a perception arose that crime was more ubiquitous in Odessa than elsewhere, that swindlers and thieves controlled the city's streets, and that the legions of gangsters in Odessa's streets were predominantly Jewish. Such beliefs became critical components of the myth of old Odessa, with the Jewish gangster emerging as one of the city's principal emblems, later canonized by Isaac Babel's *Odessa Stories.* Disentangling myth from reality is extremely difficult, as memoirists and newspaper reporters were complicit in the process of mythologizing the city's underworld. Moreover, the alleged link between criminality and the Jew had a long genealogy in European history and culture, further complicating the relationship between fact and fiction. Nevertheless, an attempt must be made to gauge the place of Jewish criminals in prerevolutionary Odessa if only to better understand the evolution of the Odessa myth, however tentative and impressionistic our conclusions may be.

Ample documentation suggests that Jews were involved in criminal activity in Odessa from the city's very foundation. In 1824 and in 1836 Odessa's customs officials released reports about Jewish counterfeiters who used Odessa as a gateway to transport their forgeries to and from Europe.[12] Evidence from as early as 1859 also attests to foreign Jews using Odessa as their hub for the international trade in prostitution, inveigling and smuggling women to Constantinople to serve in brothels, an industry that would burgeon after 1881, when Jewish immigration out of Russia markedly increased.[13] In 1880, 1,828 criminal cases involving Jews came before Odessa's courts compared to 2,105 cases with Christian defendants. According to these figures, Jews were responsible for 46.5 percent of crimes that went to trial, a rate well above their share in the population at the time, which was 25.22 percent.[14]

Jewish criminal activity in Odessa is more richly documented for the years following the 1905 Revolution. Il'a Gerasimov estimates that Jews made up as much as 50 percent of those accused of crimes between 1907 and 1917.[15] Crime reports in the popular Penny Press *Odesskaia pochta,* which began publication in 1909, frequently implicated Jews. In its inaugural year, for instance, the newspaper documented the arrest of Jewish thieves almost daily, with Jews making up at least half of those reportedly apprehended by the authorities.[16] But drawing conclusions based on statistics is problematic for several reasons. First, police reports, court records, and newspapers from this era almost never record nationality or religion; whether or not the accused was Jewish must be ascertained by his or her name, which is not always a reliable indicator.[17] Second, incidents considered "criminal" in Imperial Russia often included those related to either politics or religion, incidents that would not necessarily be branded as illicit in democratic states with

firmly entrenched civil rights. Many of those engaged in revolutionary activities were tried as criminals, and many of those accused of robberies invoked "revolution" to justify what they had done.[18] Statistical assessments are tentative at best, and arguably tell us little that is meaningful about Jewish involvement in Odessa's underworld.[19]

Some conclusions can be drawn, however, with respect to the types of crimes in which Jews were predominantly involved. Police reports, court records, newspapers, and other sources suggest that Jews were heavily engaged in counterfeiting (*poddelka, fal'shivomonetchiki*)and other forms of swindling (loosely described in Russian as *aferisty* and *moshenniki*). Such activities included the acquisition of property of deceased people through the production of false promissory notes (*vekselia*), the forging of both Russian and foreign currency, and the fashioning of false passports.[20] This should not be surprising: forging currency and documents requires a measure of education—or at least literacy—which most Jewish men in Imperial Russia received during childhood.[21] In the case of international counterfeiting operations, fluency in multiple languages as well as collaborators abroad were essential, and the Jews were in an advantageous position in this respect as well. Jewish women also operated as counterfeiters, though usually working in conjunction with their husbands.[22] There were many Jewish pickpockets (*karmanniki, marovikhery*) active in Odessa, both small-time operators and those working at the international level.[23] Jews were often fences for stolen goods, even when the thieves themselves were not Jewish. One criminal investigator maintained, for instance, that Jews had almost exclusive control of the trade in stolen horses and cattle, despite the fact that Jews rarely figured among the ranks of horse thieves (*konokrady*).[24]

Perhaps the most conspicuous realm in which Jewish criminals operated was the international prostitution trade. A thorough analysis of *Odesskaia pochta* suggests that the Jews played a leading role in this industry, with most reported perpetrators bearing obvious Jewish names.[25] Although hardly conclusive, that *Odesskaia pochta* predominantly employed Jewish editors and journalists renders the possibility of an anti-Semitic bias highly unlikely. As with international counterfeiters, pervasive Jewish involvement is not astonishing, since a command of languages and networks of collaborators abroad were necessary for success. Moreover, given that Odessa was one of the most active ports in Russia as well as directly en route to Constantinople—already a hub for the white slave trade for centuries—the city was a logical point for both obtaining and transporting these unfortunate women. Their victims were also principally Jewish, with most lured into going abroad, usually to New York, Rio, or Buenos Aires, through promises of marriage, career, and escape from the destitution of daily life in the Pale.[26]

All the crimes discussed thus far suggest Jewish involvement in felonies that were economic in nature and usually nonviolent; trickery and fraud were

their weapons of choice. To be sure, Jews also participated in extortion rackets (*vymogatel'stvo*) and armed robbery,[27] but the number of such incidents appears to be lower among Jews than other ethnic groups.[28] The realms of Jewish criminality in Odessa, in fact, roughly paralleled those of Jewish lawbreakers in New York during this era, thereby suggesting that patterns established in the Old World were imported to America.[29]

Another useful method for assessing Jewish involvement in crime is to examine the penetration of Yiddish and Hebraic words into Russian criminal slang (*blatnoi zhargon* or *blatnaia muzyka*).[30] Such an approach cannot lead to any firm conclusions, as the compilers of argot dictionaries had a certain agenda, and their intent in producing such documents may significantly reduce their accuracy.[31] Moreover, simply because a particular Jewish word was used to denote a specific crime does not necessarily imply that those who perpetrated such crimes were Jewish. Taking such qualifications into account, however, it can be demonstrated that words of Jewish origin figured prominently in Russian thieves' cant during this era. To cite a few examples: *marovikher* was the term often used to designate a pickpocket, a word used in Yiddish as well, having been derived from the Hebrew verb *harviakh,* meaning "to profit" or "to gain."[32] Another crime bearing a name of Hebraic origin was *khipesnichestvo,* which involved robbing somebody while he was with a prostitute.[33] The term comes from the Hebrew verb *khipes,* meaning "to search." One often encounters the word *khevra* or *khevre,* for a criminal gang, which in Yiddish is used more generally to signify a group of friends.[34] Finally, the word for document, *ksiva,* often designating a false passport, comes from the Hebrew verb *kasav,* "to write."[35] Examples of this process of linguistic borrowings abound, thereby demonstrating the impact of Jewish criminals on Russia's underworld, with Odessa being one of the principal centers of such cross-cultural encounters.

Perhaps the most striking conclusion that can be drawn about Jewish criminals during the early twentieth century in Odessa is the extent to which they came to the city from elsewhere in the Pale of Settlement. Police reports and court records usually mention the place of origin of the accused, with big cities like Warsaw figuring most prominently, though complemented by other smaller towns such as Berdichev.[36] Odessa's underworld seems to have retained an immigrant character into the twentieth century, with the city not only attracting those yearning for wealth through an honest day's work but also those preferring a quicker route. But it is precisely here that the convoluted relationship between myth and reality becomes most apparent: Odessa may have become such a haven for the delinquents and thieves of Russia *because* of its reputation as the empire's Eldorado, where the wealthy could easily be plundered and the dreamers of wealth could be hoodwinked and ensnared into elaborate scams. And the belief that Odessa was the capital of crime may have further impelled the corrupt and the crooked into

seeking out existing networks of like-minded people. The myth itself may have been complicit in producing reality, with Odessa's notorious reputation shaping the city's crime-ridden economy and its villainous social composition just as much as the reality of crime gave rise to the myth.

Twentieth-Century Mythmaking

The production of myth during this period, however, would scarcely have been possible without the presence of literary mythmakers in Odessa. Numerous writers of both "fact" and "fiction" vividly described Odessa's underworld—real or imagined—and all its colorful characters through literature, memoirs, newspapers, and journals. Before turning to a detailed analysis of the content and themes of the Odessa myth in the early twentieth century, we need to sketch the lives and works of those responsible for bringing old Odessa into people's homes through print rather than robbery.

In the realm of fiction, pride of place goes to Semen Iushkevich, a native Odessan Jew who wrote Russian novels, short stories, and plays about Jewish prostitutes, pimps, and career con artists. Born in 1868 and essentially remaining a resident of Odessa until 1920 when he emigrated to Western Europe, Iushkevich wrote most of his Odessa-centered works in the first decade and a half of the twentieth century.[37] He wrote at least six stories and one play about the tragic fate of the young Jewish women who were pushed into the streets and brothels because of poverty and familial circumstances.[38] But it was his six-hundred-page novel, *Leon Drei,* that captured the spirit of the Odessa myth more than any other work from this period.[39] The novel portrays Leon Drei, an egotistical swindler who is obsessed with acquiring wealth, seducing women, and excessively indulging in sumptuous cuisine. Leon Drei—whose surname derives from the Yiddish word *dreyer,* meaning "trickster"[40]—is in part a successor to Osip Rabinovich's rogue, Morits Sefardi, as he was a young, handsome, secularized Jewish parvenu manipulating the crowds in Odessa's fashionable clubs and cafés to achieve his crooked ends. Yet *Leon Drei* is as much the product of Sholem Aleichem's Menakhem-Mendl stories and Osip Rabinovich's tale of Khaim-Shulim Feige, insofar as Iushkevich uses Jewish humor and cultural tropes to depict his comical villain. Leon Drei is thus the first Odessan Jewish criminal who is a genuine Odessit: on the one hand, he is physically attractive, virile, and enjoys a decadently opulent lifestyle that transcends the destitution of the archetypal weak and passive shtetl Jew; on the other hand, much about his mannerisms bears traces of the shtetl from which his ancestors came.[41]

Iushkevich was not alone in bringing the Odessan landscape and its Jewish underworld to Russian literature. Aleksandr Kuprin also wrote a great deal on similar themes at the same time.[42] Neither Jewish nor an Odessan by birth, Kuprin became fascinated with both the people and the place; his stories depict the city's

brothels, taverns, and streets where vice and violence coexisted.[43] His most famous tale is probably "Gambrinus," which follows the adventures of a Jewish fiddler.[44] Kuprin was also the first writer to introduce the robust and swashbuckling Jewish adventurer into Russian literature, a literary type who later figured prominently in Isaac Babel's stories and Eduard Bagritskii's poetry.[45] Like Iushkevich, Kuprin wrote a multivolume work in the years after the 1905 Revolution, centered on dissipation and criminality but focused on life in a brothel rather than the exploits of a Jewish rogue.[46]

But the portrayal of Jewish criminals and other lowlifes was not confined to high literary culture, which was largely inaccessible to those with little education and minimal literacy. Dime-store detective novels were also an important source of entertainment in Late Imperial Russia; literacy was on the rise both in the cities and the villages, and readers voraciously consumed popular fiction involving bandits and detectives, particularly after 1905.[47] Grigorii Breitman, a native of Odessa, invented a domestic version of a Sherlock Holmes-like character who used his perspicacity (along with the able assistance of a Doctor Watson-like sidekick) to follow the trails of jewel thieves from Odessa across the empire.[48] Other writers fancifully depicted the escapades of Son'ka Zolotaia Ruchka (Sonia the Golden Hand), a legendary Jewish con artist whose beauty, seductive powers, and intellect placed her among Russia's most successful criminals of the late nineteenth century.[49] Jewish criminals can be found in all these tales, with Odessa serving as an incubator and epicenter of their gangsterism.

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries also witnessed the rise of the popular press in Imperial Russia's cities, and, with the fourth-largest urban population in the empire, Odessa was no exception.[50] In 1914 more than sixty periodicals were published regularly, in a variety of languages catering to Odessa's heterogeneous inhabitants.[51] Jews figured prominently as editors and journalists in Odessa's popular press; an estimated 90 percent of those working for *Odesskie novosti,* one of Odessa's popular liberal dailies, were of Jewish origin, including the Zionist Vladimir Jabotinsky, who was a regular contributor.[52] Another popular daily with a liberal reformist agenda was *Odesskii listok,* founded in 1872; in 1917 it became the Kadet Party's official organ in Odessa.[53] However, two other periodical publications, *Odesskaia pochta* and *Krokodil,* proved to be the most fertile ground for the construction and dissemination of the Odessa myth.

The Penny Press *Odesskaia pochta* ran from 1909 until 1919, claiming a daily sales rate of seventy thousand.[54] Considered by many to be "boulevard" and "philistine," its agenda was also of a liberal reformist bent. It reported on Odessa's underworld with a distinctive combination of sensationalism, tragedy, and humor. The paper's editor, Aleksandr Finkel' was Jewish, as was its foremost chronicler of the city's seamy side, Iakov Osipovich Sirkis, who wrote under the pseudonym

"Faust."[55] As Roshanna Sylvester points out in her study of *Odesskaia pochta,* Faust used his daily column to depict the deplorable living conditions of the (primarily Jewish) residents of the Moldavanka District, empathizing with their tragic need to turn to crime in order to survive.[56] But Faust's writings were not merely about misfortune, condemnation, and a call for reform. His voluminous musings about Odessa, its gangsters, and its culture are infused with the humor and tropes characteristic of the Odessa myth. Regularly mixing fact and fiction in his columns, Faust drew on schlemiels, Jewish gangster aristocrats, and biblical and Talmudic stories, and even wrote verses (*kuplety*) to depict Odessa's imagined landscape of depravity. Through Faust's writings we get a prime example of Jewish acculturation in Odessa, where Yiddish inflections and Jewish motifs survived the widespread adoption of the Russian language and continued to flourish with wit and charm on the pages of one of Odessa's most popular newspapers.

Humor found other outlets as well, and ever since this era Odessa has had a reputation for producing Russia's most irreverent jokers. The original *Krokodil* (*Crocodile*) journal was in fact published in Odessa from 1911–1912, later serving as the prototype for the Soviet Union's most popular satirical magazine, which bore the same name. The Moscow-based *Krokodil* lasted for all seven decades of the Soviet Union's existence, with many contributors having learned their craft by writing for its Odessan predecessor. Odessan humor, rooted as it was in Jewish culture, germinated on the pages of *Krokodil,* which, along with *Odesskaia pochta,* served as a crucial agent in the diffusion of the Odessa myth.[57]

The production of the Odessa myth in the first two decades of the twentieth century was thus a prolific enterprise. Newspapers, journals, and writers turned their gaze onto the city and its people, depicting the crime, debauchery, glitter, and poverty they observed through the prism of an already existing myth of old Odessa, whose foundations had been laid in the nineteenth century by an earlier generation of writers. And the emergence of a literate society in Odessa meant that the fabled city of gold and sin had an audience ready to consume these images.[58] Myth and reality now reinforced each other on a much grander scale, thereby cementing Odessa's reputation, which began to radiate outward beyond the boundaries of this seaport on the Russian frontier.

The City of Sin and the Birth of the Odessit

At the center of the Odessa myth during this era was, of course, the city itself. Nineteenth-century mythmakers had begun the process of juxtaposing Odessa's opulence with its wickedness, positing a Manichean duality of heaven and hell which pervaded the land and permeated its people. The production of such images continued in the twentieth century but with a greater focus on the city's seamy side—the sleaze behind the glitter and the debauchery behind the merriment. Sex,

violence, and wild nights of revelry coexisted with the flurry of commerce and the sumptuous feasting in elegant restaurants, theaters, and cafés. And a community of rogues and jokers thrived in this city, feeling equally comfortable in Eldorado and Gomorrah.

Imagery of wealth, abundance, and exotic goods continued to saturate representations of Odessa. Aleksandr Deribas, a great-nephew of the city's titular founder, described the wine from France, cigars from Havana, and Turkish tobacco being sold by "authentic living Turks" (*nastoiashchie zhivye turki*) all available for a pittance; rich or poor, everyone could partake in the pleasures offered by old Odessa.[59] Iushkevich's Leon Drei regularly indulged in the lavish cuisine of the city's finest eateries; while attending a dinner theater, he consumed the food spread out before him with mind and body:

> Leon was no longer watching the stage. Moaning sweetly, he plunged into his food. . . . After the herring he requested sturgeon with horseradish, another portion of bread, an entrecote with potatoes, and, feeling tipsy, returned to his bottle of beer, which he finished off in one minute. Next he ordered Roquefort, egg whites with jam, and drank up a second bottle of beer. Finally, after disturbing his neighbors with his shouts, he ordered the waiter to bring him coffee with liquor.[60]

And even when not eating, Leon fantasized about food and the perpetual gluttony he envisioned for himself as a prosperous Odessit. He was captivated, in particular, by lobster, "those fine fellows (*molodtsy*) whose role in this world is to always be tasty! . . . Hello Mr. lobster, I am coming back to you! You are so great, my sweet lobster, you live on this earth just for me."[61] Lobster, like all shellfish, is not kosher, and perhaps Iushkevich intentionally chose this delicacy to represent Odessa's abundance as forbidden fruit, as a wellspring of deviant pleasure for Russian Jewry. The Jew could live and eat well, recklessly abandoning himself (and his religious heritage) to his insatiable and rebellious appetite, consuming all his ancestors had been denied in the impoverished shtetls of the northern Pale.[62]

Amid this abundance, the Odessit was born, an indigenous inhabitant of this frontier town, who from the moment of birth absorbed the city's ethos of pleasure seeking, fleecing, and jocularity. According to *Odesskaia pochta*'s Faust, an Odessan child's first words were usually "Robina and Fankoni"—Odessa's two most posh cafés where the crème de la crème of society made money over brandy, cigars, and caviar, while the city's charlatans relieved the rich of their wealth through trickery and deceit. The child's father would jump for joy and exclaim, "May I live so well, my baby will be a great merchant!" ("Chtob ia tak zhil, rebenok budet bol'shoi kupets!").[63] For Faust, "Odessans are a nation whose heads are filled with schemes [*kombinatsiia*] for acquiring money."[64] Leon Drei's passion for wealth often left

him daydreaming over cash. In one instance, he stopped before a banking house and hungrily stared at the Russian and foreign bank notes in the window, thinking that "if only this thick glass could magically disappear, or if I had Aladdin's Lamp to help me, oh how quickly I would stuff my pockets with these beautiful precious bank notes!"[65]

The quest for wealth had little to do with toil and industry, and Leon Drei's yearning for his own personal genie is emblematic of the Odessit's laid-back approach toward work. The Russian writer Petr Pil'skii observed how Odessa was a "city of loafers [*gorod lodyrei*]. It's as if nobody does anything. Everywhere I look—what a bunch of happy idlers [*bezdel'niki*]."[66] Arkadii Averchenko noted a similar phenomenon, describing a typical day for Odessans:

> In every other city it is customary for citizens to work from morning until sunset, and then abandon themselves to relaxation, merrily strolling through the city. But in Odessa, the authentic Odessit starts his relaxation and his merry strolls through the city in the morning—already at nine o'clock. By nine in the morning all of Odessa's principal streets are filled with idle people, who amble lazily along the sidewalks, with faltering steps, stopping before every window with some sort of obstinate indifference, yet taking an interest in every trifling incident, things that Petersburgers would pass over without the slightest attention. . . . At first I thought that Odessans merely stroll around early in the morning and that by eleven or twelve o'clock they would get busy with work. But that was hardly the case. At eleven o'clock everybody takes their seats on the terraces of the numerous cafés absorbing themselves in their newspapers. Nobody attends to his own affairs. . . . Twelve o'clock. Other cities are immersed in work at a feverish pitch. But not in Odessa. Not Odessans. At noon, to the delight of all, music begins to thunder in the restaurants, with joyful singing emanating from within. And Odessans, believing in all sincerity that their workday has ended, set out to the restaurants in droves. There is no better city for sluggards than Odessa.[67]

The Odessit's daily life was all about rest, relaxation, music, and fine dining, with all thoughts of labor pushed out of his mind for good.

If Odessa by day was a languid festival of crude, lazy, and gluttonous citizens, the city of sin really sprang to life in the evenings, when the streets were flooded with merrymakers. Jacob Adler, one of the founders of the Yiddish theater in Russia, recalled his childhood escapades with relish, describing how

> at night the whole great city on the Black Sea tore as though out of prison in search of pleasure. Drawn by the lights, the crowds, the noise, the people flowed out over the streets like a throng of pagan worshipers. And Yankele Adler, or as he was now known, "Yankele Kulachnik," Jake the Fist, was

> part of that sinful procession. For a merry life one needs money, and there were plenty of young charlatans among us with full pockets. . . . Money there was, and to spare. More important, there were ways to spend it. Everything around us said, "Live!" And we lived![68]

For the prostitute, there was money to be made, as Odessa's main thoroughfare, Deribasovskaia Street, attracted an army of intoxicated young men in search of sexual gratification. Semen Iushkevich vividly described such scenes through the eyes of a young Jewish streetwalker:

> Men of the evening hurry along, preoccupied with getting ready for joy and delight. Students, bureaucrats, sailors, soldiers, officers, shop assistants, factory workers, clerks—all anxiously searching for women. Thus begins the evening delirium [*bred*]. . . . [And the hookers] are always here, as if they are a part of Deribasovskaia Street, like the houses, the garden, and the asphalt sidewalk. . . . Night falls. . . . From one end of the street to the other the multitudes crawl. . . . It's as if none of the carousers has a single worry; nobody thinks about tomorrow. A joyful mood for all, as tonight is the evening of love.[69]

Petr Pil'skii found himself "amazed, captivated, and bewitched" by all the "frivolity, guffaws, and joie de vivre" he encountered in the countless restaurants, cafés, beer halls, and wine cellars on every corner. Buzzing, moaning, and singing emanated from everywhere in this "wonderful city, a legend of a city, the city of moans and confusion" ("etot chudo-gorod, gorod-legenda, sumatokha i ston.")[70] Life could be one endless party; there was no room for suffering amid the festivities of these "Odessa nights," as Jacob Adler put it.[71]

Depravity transcended the downtown area, engulfing much of Odessa. A dissolute climate was nurtured by the city's international port, which regularly replenished the taverns and brothels with fresh blood from beyond the sea. Aleksandr Kuprin told of the "sailors of different nationalities, fishermen, stokers, rollicking cabin-boys, thieving water-rats, machinists, laborers, boatmen, stevedores, [and] divers," all of whom were

> young, healthy, and saturated with the pungent odor of the sea and of the fish; they knew the arduousness of toil, loved the allure and horror of daily risk, and, above all things, valued strength, the audacity and tang of virile words, and the cleverness that comes of courage; but ashore they gave themselves up with savage enjoyment to broad debauchery, drinking and brawls. Of evenings, the lights of the great city, running upward to the heights, would lure them on, like eyes of magic radiance; always holding promises of some new, joyous thing, never yet experienced—and always deceiving.[72]

The predominantly Jewish Moldavanka District was no different than the rest of the city. Faust described the "houses of debauchery" concentrated on Glukhaia and Kartamyshevskaia Streets which resounded with the joyous sounds of music, laughter, and the rumble of dancing. The Moldavanka had become, according to Faust, "Odessa's moral garbage can."[73] Vice proliferated everywhere as one long sinuous undulation, which connected the seashore to the city's suburbs in an endless swath of decadence.

The Odessan Jew thrived in this atmosphere; he adapted himself to the tough streets of the Moldavanka by demonstrating his physical strength and sexual prowess. Jacob Adler joined the ranks of the so-called new gladiators, young Jews who became obsessed with boxing. He quickly achieved success and fame through these boxing matches, occasionally "emerging with a bloody nose or a battered eye, but [nevertheless] a 'star' on the streets of the Moldavanka, and a hero to the street boys who tried to give me bribes to beat up some kid they had it in for."[74] Armed with his status as an intrepid fighter, Adler became a member of the "pavement roamers," a famous gang of Odessan Jews. Adler described how they were

> the young sports and toughs who at nightfall roamed the streets looking for a wedding, a brawl, excitement of any kind. The greatest pleasure . . . was dancing at strange weddings. As hungry wolves roam the woods for food, so we roamed the streets looking for these festive gatherings. . . . Once inside we would push aside the older people, grab the prettiest girls, and take them out on the floor in a polka, a mazurka, a quadrille. The girls pretended to be angry, but really they liked it, and the floor burned under our feet. The guests wanted to go on with traditional Jewish dances, and fights often broke out with the younger men. On one of those nights the scandal rose to such heights that the police came in, and the whole gang of us spent the night in the lockup.[75]

Thus, admitted Adler with pride, "through my dark wanderings over the great city I fell into bad company, I became a boxer, a pugilist."[76]

Many of the Odessans depicted in such images were Jewish, and, given that Jews made up one-third of Odessa's population, this should come as no surprise. But most significant about these representations is the way in which mythmakers infused implicit Jewishness into their characters, marking the Odessit and his city as innately Jewish. Faust once quipped that Odessa's population was made up of "swindlers, traders, and '*shabesgoys*'" ("*aferisty, maklery, i* '*shabesgoi*'").[77] *Shabesgoy* was the term traditionally used by Jews to designate the Gentiles (goys) they would hire to do their work for them on the Sabbath, since Jewish law precludes the Jew from engaging in any form of labor on this holy day.[78] The Odessit was not merely a con artist, a merchant, or some combination of the two; he was also, by definition, Jewish, as on the Jewish day of rest he needed to employ a Gentile to manage his affairs so that religious obligations would not hinder his aspirations for wealth.

The ascription of Jewishness onto the myth of old Odessa is most apparent in the humor used to describe the city and its residents. Implicit Jewishness through humor can be found in many depictions of the Odessit, in literary texts and in periodicals such as *Odesskaia pochta* and *Krokodil.* Arkadii Averchenko's shipmate, described in the opening of this chapter, is marked as both Jewish *and* criminal through his banter with the author. When asked if he is from Odessa, his immediate reaction is to respond with a series of rhetorical questions reminiscent of a Talmudic discourse, when a simple yes or no would have sufficed. The protagonist is also marked as criminal by the content of his answers, proclaiming that being called an Odessit is, in fact, a euphemism for branding somebody a thief. For Averchenko, the archetypal Odessit is Jewish in form and criminal in content, and, although he is speaking Russian, his entire demeanor suggests something foreign and perhaps exotic.

The humor used in the journal *Krokodil* is in large measure Jewish, abounding in examples of perverse reasoning, characters missing the point of discussions, and conceptual distortions typical of Jewish folk heroes, such as the Wise Men of Chelm and Hershele Ostropolier, the legendary eighteenth-century Jewish trickster.[79] In the tradition of the schnorrer, many of these anecdotes are replete with characters who manipulate logic and language to achieve fraudulent objectives. Jewishness is more often implied than explicit, further confirming that Odessa was marked as a "Jewish city" by the early twentieth century. Consider this dialogue between a man (who does not have a Jewish name) and a woman enjoying a romantic moment by Odessa's beautiful seaside:

> "My dear sweet Nikolai Vasil'evich, when I look at this wonderful gentle sea I forget about everything."
>
> "In that case, lend me seventy-five rubles."[80]

In another example, we see how logic and fraud come together with comical results:

> Two Odessans are leaving Café Fankoni. The porter hands one of them a coat, for which the patron generously gives him a two ruble tip. Out on the street a few minutes later, the other Odessit looks at his friend and exclaims:
>
> "Have you lost your mind? Who gives such an excessive amount for a tip?"
>
> "But look—he gave me such a beautiful coat!"[81]

The Odessit may be a scammer and a cheat, but logic dictates that generosity be rewarded, even for illicitly acquired merchandise. In many such anecdotes and vignettes the adjective "Odessan" (*odesskii*) is synonymous with the practice of swindling:

> Two patrons enter a café and sit down at a table. The waiter approaches them to take their order.
>
> "What can I get you?"
>
> "We would like two cups of coffee. I would like a French coffee [*po-frantsuzski*]. And you?" he asks turning to his friend.
>
> "I would like an Odessan coffee [*po-odesski*]!"
>
> "What's that? I've never heard of such a coffee!"
>
> "Odessan coffee—that means: I'll drink it, but you'll pay for it."[82]

To be Odessan means to cheat, and the city's residents wore this badge with pride.

Swindling through sophisticated trickery became a defining characteristic of the Odessit, and when the trickster accomplished his ends with humor and charm, he was extolled for his artistic abilities and his originality. Jacob Adler waxed eloquent on his fellow Odessan, Yisrol Rosenberg, whose inordinate talents in the art of dissimulation brought him easy money and crowds of admirers:

> Though he used his talents mostly for imposture and fakery, his ability was enormous. His memory was astonishing, he knew thousands of people in Odessa by name, there was no situation he could not get out of, and everything he touched turned to money. I have always believed that if he had put his mind to some better use—to books, say or to science—the world would have rung with his name and he would have been immortal.[83]

Adler recounted how Rosenberg once concocted an elaborate scheme to bilk a counterfeiter out of a substantial amount of money, using his flair for manipulating people's weaknesses through a false identity and linguistic entrapment.

> This is how Rosenberg got rich. Since nothing in Odessa was hidden from him, he got wind that a man from Ochakov (a town near Kherson) had come to town with a sizable sum of money with which he intended to buy counterfeit bills. The man was staying at a hotel near the police station.
>
> Late that night Rosenberg, together with his "assistant," knock at the door. Rosenberg is in the uniform of a high-ranking officer. The assistant is dressed as a gendarme, the government cockade on his hat.
>
> "You are so-and-so?" Rosenberg demands in official tones.
>
> The man nods that he is.
>
> "You are a resident of Ochakov?"
>
> "I am from Ochakov. He is already chattering with fear.
>
> "We have a report that you are a counterfeiter. Show your money."
>
> The counterfeiter, more dead than alive, pulls out everything he has.

> Rosenberg puts on a monocle, examines the bills. "You have nothing more than this?"
>
> "Nothing, gracious Excellency. Only silver."
>
> "Good. Our report was false. Your money is good." Rosenberg puts the assignats in an envelope, seals it, puts on an official-looking stamp, tells the counterfeiter to put his signature on the outside, and tells him to bring the envelope at nine the next morning to the police station.
>
> "I will bring it," the man croaks out.
>
> But Rosenberg seems to be thinking the matter over. "No—better give it to this officer." He hands the envelope to the assistant and says to the counterfeiter, "You may claim your money at the police station at nine tomorrow. At nine exactly. Do you hear? Not a moment later."
>
> The man does not argue. The assistant puts the sealed envelope in his breast pocket and the two "officers" depart.
>
> The counterfeiter, needless to say, did not show up at the police station next morning, but made tracks out of Odessa long before daybreak.[84]

Similarly Leon Drei "perfectly understands people. He always plays on their weaknesses. . . . Nobody could guess that he was leading them all by the nose."[85] Rosenberg and Drei both enriched themselves using the nonviolent and refined con artistry for which the Odessit became infamous, an infamy that would persist during the Soviet period through humorous literary characters such as Il'f and Petrov's Ostap Bender.

Odessan criminals often praised their own creative abilities in order to claim that their chosen professions were legitimate and worthy of respect. In Aleksandr Kuprin's story, "An Insult" ("Obida"), a group of thieves insist that their "profession is very near what is generally known as art, because it is made up of all the elements which go to make up art: inspiration, a calling, imagination, resourcefulness, ambition, and a long process of learning."[86] Maintaining that they are "honest thieves," the leader of their gang vilifies the criminals who lack skill and artistry, "reptiles" whose evil deeds give his honorable and talented men bad names.[87]

Gifted thieves were a regular topic of discussion in *Odesskaia pochta,* such as the "elusive" Lev Berkovich, a burglar who primarily robbed doctors and lawyers by posing as a prospective client. Before his arrest, his "dizzying" career of crime included more than one hundred of the most "brazenly clever" burglaries, allegedly breaking the record set by the Son'ka Zolotaia Ruchka. Berkovich was also a graduate of theater school, suggesting that education in the arts was an effective path for a successful career as an Odessan criminal.[88]

The education and intellect of Jewish thieves in Odessa was often played up by mythmakers in the press, in memoirs, and in literature. V. V. Lange, a criminal investigator, stressed that many of the most talented cardsharps were, in fact,

university educated and even maintained public positions in the community.[89] The gang leader in Kuprin's "An Insult," prided himself on knowing seven languages aside from Russian: German, French, English, Italian, Polish, Ruthenian, and Yiddish.[90] Education was also used occasionally as a metaphor for the process of becoming criminal. In September 1909 Faust devoted his column to Odessa's "thieves' academy" (*vorovskaia akademiia*) which was founded by "the Professor of criminal artistry (*vorovskoe iskusstvo*) Ruvin Freidenberg." Schooling primarily took place in Odessa's flea market, with novices training under the guidance of their more experienced peers. Graduates, Faust insisted, went on to become both brave criminals and skilled teachers themselves, taking up the task of educating Odessa's next generation of gangsters.[91]

Linguistic manipulation among criminals in the early twentieth century had an additional twist, as this was an era of revolution and pogroms. Criminals often justified their activities—whether street robberies, apartment burglaries, or extortion rackets—by representing their crimes through the lens of class conflict. One Jewish thief (known as the "king of the thieves"), who was detained by police in Kiev in 1909, insisted that he only robbed the wealthy, "those with an excess of resources; I never touch those in dire need who must work hard to earn money for bread. Such an approach to crime assuages my conscience and I never reproached myself for it."[92] Kuprin's gangsters, in "An Insult," similarly condemn the bourgeoisie who treat Russia as a "fat turkey," unjustly enriching themselves. Citing Proudhon, their leader maintains that "all property is theft" and that when the Revolution comes his "brave, skilful, and obedient fellows" will be manning the barricades in the name of liberty. Property will then become a "sad recollection of the past, and then, alas! We too, shall disappear from the face of the earth."[93] Kuprin's thieves further claimed that they were being unfairly accused of launching pogroms against the Jews, when in fact they had been living in the Moldavanka, participating in their defense.[94] Such self-fashioning of bandits into Robin Hoods and revolutionary heroes would significantly increase during the civil war period in Odessa, between 1918 and 1920.

Revolution, class consciousness, and the defense of Jews were not the only means employed to justify actions that were deemed criminal. Jews accused of crimes often cited religious practices in refuting charges against them. V. V. Lange discussed the case of a Jewish couple that came to Odessa from Podolia and was accused of bootlegging alcohol. They claimed, however, that they were in fact selling a special "Passover" (*peisakhovska*) vodka.[95] In another case, this one from 1916, a group of Jews were accused of operating a secret distillery on Sredniaia Street. The couple found in possession of the equipment, Duvid-Zeilik and Masia Litvak, insisted that it did not belong to them, that the owner was somebody who rented a room from them, and that it was being used only to make a "sweet nonalcoholic Passover beverage."[96] Their excuse did not hold up, and the Litvaks,

along with others involved in the operation, received jail sentences ranging from several months to a year.[97] Linguistic manipulation did not always work, but the use of Judaism as an excuse added an additional level of sophistication to the Jewish criminal of Odessa.

The Jewishness of Odessa's thieves comes out in other ways as well, often making them look pious and family-oriented, thereby mitigating their criminality to a certain extent through more favorable representations. Lange related how once, when working undercover, he solicited a fake passport from a Jewish forger who lived on Ekaterinskaia Street. The counterfeiter, however, kept Lange waiting for more than an hour at their rendezvous point, as it turned out to be the Sabbath and "Jewish law" required the forger to travel on foot.[98] Ironically the transaction of forged merchandise did not seem to bother the pious crook, notwithstanding the Jewish injunction against doing work on the divinely designated day of rest. Wisdom, kindness, and family values were also quite prominent among Jews in Odessa's underworld. When the star of Grigorii Breitman's detective stories, the brilliant investigator Leshchinskii, found himself puzzled by a challenging case, he turned for help to Old Motl (*Staryi Motl*), a fence (*blataka*) for stolen goods. Motl was "a likeable old man who was viewed sympathetically by criminals and the police; everybody trusted him, as he never deceived anyone, he never did anyone any harm."[99] In return for helping Leshchinskii with his case, Motl merely asked for one favor—that Leshchinskii exert his influence to get his daughter released from jail. "All the same, I am a father, Pan Leshchinskii," insisted Motl, "and you must understand, that I am prepared to do anything for my daughter."[100] Although Odessa was a city of Jewish knaves, criminality did not preclude putting one's family before everything else.

Even the contemptible Jewish pimps, prostitute traders, and peddlers of pornography occasionally revealed touches of piety and ethical values. In his novel *The Pit* (*Iama*) Aleksandr Kuprin described Semen Gorizont, a Jewish businessman who lived by "the traffic in the body of woman."[101] Gorizont possessed many of the attributes characteristic of Jewish criminals: he enjoyed economic success with his procured women finding their way to Constantinople and Argentina; his business brought him geographic mobility; and he was a master of false identities, as "he had changed so many names that he had not only forgotten what year he had been Nathanielson and during what Bakalyar, but even his own name was beginning to seem to him one of his pseudonyms."[102] Gorizont viewed women with contempt, and believed they were the same as any other "merchandise," be it "herring, lime, flour, beef, or lumber."[103] Nevertheless, "he would with assiduity visit the synagogue of Fridays. The Day of Atonement, Passover, and the Feast of the Tabernacles were invariably and reverently observed by him everywhere fate might have cast him."[104] Along with his faith, Gorizont remained devoted to his

family, regularly sending money to "his mother, a little old woman, and [to] a hunchbacked sister" who both lived in Odessa.[105] Despicable his crimes may be, but the Jewish pimp from Odessa was softened by a trace of humanity rooted in his sense of tradition and filial obligation.

Humor is usually the key ingredient that makes the Odessit Jewish and the Jew an Odessit, with interpersonal relationships between thief and spouse and thief and parents playing a particularly prominent role. On December 15, 1914, *Odesskaia pochta* reported on the arrest of Marochnik, a railroad thief who, operating under the alias "Mishka Amerikanets," achieved legendary status as a "king of the criminal world." Yet Marochnik tried to downplay his culpability, maintaining that he had vowed to quit crime three years earlier. So then what exactly happened? According to Marochnik, his young wife, Roza, compelled him to return to a life of crime, as she demanded a luxurious lifestyle, all the "splendor" that was hers by right of being a "queen." *Odesskaia pochta* reported this story with wit, citing the "old French saying . . . behind everything lies a woman."[106] But the Jewishness of Marochnik and his wife trumps any French connection to their escapades. The nagging and domineering Jewish wife is, of course, one of the most popular themes in Jewish humor, as we saw in chapter 1, with Menakhem-Mendl and his wife, Sheyne-Sheyndl. Marochnik's excuse, in fact, is reminiscent of a famous Yiddish joke:

> A Jew once broke into somebody's house in order to rob him. When the police came to search the premises they discovered that the thief had only taken a handful of small objects, leaving the diamonds, gold, and silver which were kept in the very same room. When the burglar was subsequently caught and brought to court, the judge asked, "What's the story? Why did you take such useless objects leaving all the valuable ones behind?" The thief responded, "Please judge, don't reprimand me; my wife has already scolded me enough for this [*Ay, zolt ir gezunt zayn, esst mir nit op di harts, mayn vayb hot mir shoyn genug gezidlt darfar*]."[107]

In the home of the Jewish thief, the nagging wife called the shots, whether the husband cum gangster was an incompetent schlimazel or a legendary king like Mishka Amerikanets.

Perhaps the greatest parody of the Odessan swindler from the perspective of stereotypical Jewish family dynamics is the relationship between Leon Drei and his mother. Leon was obsessed with pleasing his mother, regularly explaining to her with relish how he planned to enrich himself through the seduction of women:

> I am looking for a woman, *mamasha.* Do you hear me? A rich and splendid woman. I will find her! Do you understand? . . . I will strip her of all her valuables. I will deftly swindle [*vymanit'*] her out of all her money, *mamasha.* Then I will repeat this with another rich woman. And

> then a third rich woman. I will sell slices of Leon for thousands, do you understand? . . . Leon's affairs will be the talk of the town![108]

Leon's doting mother approved of his quest for riches and commanded her son to "rise higher and higher . . . show everybody what it means to be a Drei."[109] Leon gave his mother a solemn oath that he would raise her to the pinnacle of opulence, promising a "glorious old age" for both her and Leon's father.[110]

To great comic effect, Iushkevich juxtaposed Leon's self-image as an avaricious womanizer with his childlike behavior before his mother. Leon unabashedly likened himself to a "swine," a "wild animal," a "fire," a master dissimulator capable of "worming his way" into somebody's confidence by playing the part of an innocent child.[111] But with his mother, he was in fact a child (or to use a present-day expression, a *Yiddishe* mama's boy), clinging to her for physical and spiritual sustenance. Leon often came to his *mamasha* and asked her to feed him, to bless him, to put him to bed, and then to wake him up with a cup of lemon tea at the ready. In Odessa's restaurants and cafés, Leon Drei might have been a dangerous rogue, but at home he was little more than a Jewish child seeking his mother's approval and clinging to her for maternal protection.

Many of the elements that shaped the imagined Odessit of the early twentieth century came out on the pages of *Odesskaia pochta* in humorous columns, suggesting that crime in Odessa could be parodied, despite its often serious consequences. In 1913 *Odesskaia pochta* serialized some amusing tales from the life of Son'ka Zolotaia Ruchka, who used her good looks and charm to seduce men in order to rob them. In one memorable episode she outmaneuvered a Jewish fence from Warsaw named "Abram Klots," whose family name is Yiddish for clumsy. Klots was true to his moniker, being depicted as inept, neurotic, jittery, and cowardly. Son'ka nimbly tricked Klots into handing over his wealth to her, thereby suggesting that Odessa's thieves were more clever than those from Warsaw.[112]

Faust reveled in writing witty columns with a Jewish subtext. In April 1910 he issued a "report" on how thieves and swindlers were "trembling" because St. Petersburg had sent police dogs to Odessa to help uproot criminals and dismantle their hold on the city. The prototypical dog was named "Tref"—somewhat of an ironic name, given that *tref* is the Jewish word for non-Kosher food. But the dog proved to be incompetent: while attempting to locate a murderer, he apprehended a doctor; while attempting to capture a robber, he went after the owner of a fashionable store. Tref proved to be no match for the thieving Odessit, perhaps implying that a kosher criminal from Odessa could always outwit a bungling Gentile (human or canine) from the capital.[113]

Odessa's mythmakers employed Jewish humor to defuse the criminal, to render him innocuous, making him into a figure who could be celebrated outright, or at the very least, laughed at for his idiosyncrasies. By ascribing Jewishness to

the nefarious Odessit, they discursively transformed Odessa from a city of sin into a shtetl of sin where the schlemiel, the trickster, and the dissolute coexisted, or, to put it more accurately, were inextricably linked. What is critical for us to understand is this relationship between Jewishness, criminality, and humor. To be an archetypal Odessit and to be part of the Odessa myth, one had to embody all these elements.

Deviant Merrymaking in a Yiddish Key

Where there was crime, sex, and intoxication there was also music—not the mellifluous sounds of the Italian opera but the spontaneous wailing of the Jewish klezmer musician whose melodies filled the city's sleazy bars.[114] Among traditional Jews in Eastern Europe, instrumental music was strictly regulated, generally forbidden except at wedding receptions. Musicians were seen as vagabonds and lowlifes who existed outside the pale of respectable Jewish society, keeping company with thieves and beggars. They were often branded as gypsies and as agents of the devil, and in the Russian Empire they generally earned their paltry income by playing for Gentiles in the inns, brothels, and taverns.[115]

But in Odessa deviance was the norm and sinners were celebrated. The klezmer was welcomed and honored for augmenting the revelry of this wicked city. Aleksandr Kuprin mythologized the Jewish musician and his esteemed place in Odessa with his story "Gambrinus," a tale about Sashka the Fiddler, who "enjoyed greater reverence and celebrity than, say, the local archbishop or governor," playing to the delight of swashbuckling sailors and thieves in a seedy underground tavern.[116] Sashka's authority had nothing to do with his appearance, as he resembled the stereotypical shtetl Jew—short, feeble, and simian-like (*oblezlaia obez'iana*).[117] Rather, it was through his music that the frail fiddler towered over the enamored roughnecks who made up his audience. Kuprin described how

> the guests became flushed, hoarse, and all damp. The tobacco smoke made the eyes smart. It was necessary to shout and to lean over the table to hear one another in the general hubbub. And only the indefatigable fiddle of Sashka, sitting on his elevation, triumphed over the stifling atmosphere, over the heat, over the reek of tobacco, gas, and beer, and over the yelling of the unceremonious public.[118]

Respect and musical prowess brought Sashka power, and by means of his virtuosity he was able to placate rowdy fishermen, just like "Orpheus pacifying the waves."[119] He regularly broke up quarrels that were "only a hair's breadth from bloodshed. He would walk up, jest, smile, grimace,—and immediately goblets would be extended to him from all sides."[120] Sashka even had a special arsenal of criminal songs he played exclusively for Odessa's thieves, who came in to Gambrinus after evenings of

lucrative robbery.[121] And through his talent and stature Sashka was able to survive the pogrom of 1905 and the Russo-Japanese War. In the shtetl he would have been an outcast, feared and reviled for his heathenism, but in deviant Odessa the Jewish klezmer was at the apex of a social structure rooted in crime and revelry.

Odessa's revelry, however, transcended the tavern, and evenings of wild music and ecstasy were characteristic of more traditional Jewish events such as weddings. Jewish weddings, by definition, were occasions for merriment, replete with lavish food and alcohol even among the most impoverished Jews in Eastern Europe. In their influential study on life in the shtetl, Mark Zborowski and Elizabeth Herzog maintained that

> a wedding is the most joyous and most elaborate festivity in shtetl life. It represents the fulfillment of the individual, who becomes fully adult only when he marries, and the basis for the perpetuation of the Jewish people, according to the commandments of God. It is the archetype of all festivity and rejoicing, the symbol of joy and completion. . . . An especially successful celebration is "as merry as a wedding."[122]

But merriment did not imply excess, and "any wedding guest who became really drunk would be an object of outraged disgust."[123] Still, the wedding represented the ultimate celebration in Jewish culture, with even the most traditional Jewish communities partaking in the music, dancing, and feasting.[124]

One of the climactic moments in Iushkevich's *Leon Drei* is the wedding of Leon's sister, an extravagant event that Leon used to ostentatiously flaunt his affluence before the very people he hoped to swindle. Leon himself acted as the master of ceremonies, leading the toasts, directing the orchestra, and controlling the guests through his charm and oratorical skills. Rising above the music and the dancing he cried out in ecstasy:

> "Ladies and gentlemen . . . what could be more sublime, more beautiful, more intelligent than a Jewish wedding? Thank you, my ancestors, for thinking this up. A Jewish wedding—this is the essence of our soul! Let's drink to it! Ladies and gentlemen," he screamed loudly once again, "I invite you to drink to our dear Jewish wedding!"[125]

Joy enveloped the room and everybody succumbed to the music and dancing.

But this was no ordinary Jewish wedding, as it was thrown by an Odessit in the city of sin, where traditional events were transformed to meet the needs of a decadent society. The din of wild music kept getting louder and louder and the dancing more rowdy, until

> suddenly everyone became flustered and began to spin in a wild, furious, circular dance [*v dikom, beshenom, krugovom pliase*]. Copper plates

> infernally [*adski*] rattled. The floor shook from the scurry of a hundred feet. The chandelier quavered. . . . Like in a haze [*tuman*], like in a nightmare [*koshmar*], everything flowed together—the people, the sounds, and the screams.[126]

Leon offered his lips to all, kissing and embracing everybody who wanted to shower him with gratitude for such an evening of revelry. But as a shrewd manipulator of crowds, Leon always maintained control, keeping his attention on the women he sought to seduce and the wealthy men he sought to exploit. The roguish Odessit knew how to throw a wild yet carefully orchestrated party intended to help him realize his elaborate machinations.

Gangster weddings in Odessa were always decadent events that teetered on the brink of chaos. In 1911 *Odesskaia pochta* reported on an "aristocratic wedding" of bandits that took place in the Moldavanka. The groom, Grigorii Tsudruk, was well known in various cities for his participation in "serious crimes," and the guest list for his "wedding feast" included approximately one hundred "thieves and swindlers." Automobiles (an uncommon sight in 1911) pulled up to the house, out of which emerged stylishly dressed gangsters in evening wear that was "obviously secondhand [*chuzhoe plecho*], as it must have been stolen." Police investigators, who attended in disguise, observed the "motley" guests, who consisted of apartment burglars (*vorovvzlomshchiki, skokari*), pickpockets (*marovikhery*), *khipesniki,* safe-crackers (*shnifery*), and counterfeiters (*kotletchiki*). The military orchestra greeted each arrival with a "festive flourish," with one famous *marovikher* even refusing to enter the house until the musicians played specifically for him. The groom took all necessary security precautions, even hiring low-level thieves to maintain order and give a signal for evacuation if a police raid should ensue.[127]

But the ensuing chaos came from within when a fight broke out between one of the groom's guests, a "quick-tempered" *skokar´* and a relative of the bride. Others joined in, and within a short time plates were flying and guests were shrieking. Neighbors who had lent their furniture and housewares to the wedding party screamed out "thieves! thieves!" and struggled to gather their belongings and flee the turmoil. The police promptly showed up at the door and, since the gates were locked, the trapped criminals sought out places to hide within the building—"burying themselves in neighboring apartments, cellars, attics and even garbage cans. Others took to the roof, losing their jacket coattails and cuffs en route." Many arrests were made. The groom, however, sat quietly in his place throughout the disorder, insisting that he had already done his time and could not be charged with anything. But his "aristocratic wedding" was over, ending in an amusing "Moldavanka sensation."[128]

The Jewish gangster's wedding emerged in the early twentieth century as an important theme in the Odessa myth. This theme would be further developed

during the Soviet period by other mythmakers, including Isaac Babel. And with new technology, the gangster wedding would be captured in musical recordings and in movies, perhaps most memorably in Babel's film *Benia Krik*. The Odessan wedding was a decadent and even violent affair but was filled with the humor that made the city famous.

Speaking Odessan

If the Odessit was defined as a rogue whose wicked behavior was more comical than dangerous, then the way he spoke was also considered both deviant and funny. Mythmakers insisted, as noted earlier, that the ethnically heterogeneous immigrants who had settled this port city during the nineteenth century had developed a unique "Odessan language" (*odesskii iazyk*). Greeks, Jews, Frenchmen, and Italians all contributed to the mix, with a healthy dose of thieves' cant thrown in for good measure. The common denominator was, of course, Russian, which, according to one tsarist official, each nationality "pronounced in its own way, but everybody managed to understand each other."[129]

The uniqueness of the Russian spoken in the region was first pointed out in print by Konstantin Zelenetskoi, a university professor, in a work published in 1855.[130] Presenting numerous examples, Zelenetskoi argued that the local idiom was characterized first and foremost by its incorrect stresses, often placed arbitrarily on the wrong syllables.[131] The use of words and expressions from other languages,[132] Russian words whose meanings had changed,[133] and incorrect declensions[134] were also widespread phenomena. What Zelenetskoi offered, however, was a serious academic study, and his work was thus atypical compared to what followed. By the end of the nineteenth century Odessa's mythmakers started to present *odesskii iazyk* as a window into the personality of the Odessit, as a means for understanding his strange customs and amusing behavior. And it was at this time that the term *odesskii iazyk* came into prominent usage, primarily through a memorable essay by Vlas Doroshevich, first published in 1895.[135]

For Doroshevich, *odesskii iazyk* was a hodgepodge of different languages, a "vinaigrette" of sorts, "a sausage that was initially made up of all the tongues of the world, prepared in a Greek manner, and topped off with a Polish sauce."[136] Visitors from the north who came to Odessa, according to Doroshevich, insisted that the inhabitants were speaking Chinese. Most remarkable of all, "Odessans claim that they are actually speaking Russian."[137] But it was a badly mangled Russian, which Doroshevich captured through numerous examples, including this dialogue allegedly overheard in an Odessan café:

> "Chaskha kofe!"
>
> "S moloka ili bez molokom?"
>
> "Bez nikomu!"

> "I want cup of coffee!"
>
> "With any milk or without some milk?"
>
> "Without nobody!"[138]

The garbled language of the Odessit permeated every facet of life, even as basic a task as ordering a beverage.

Doroshevich made light of the fact that Odessans considered themselves cultured, like Parisians, peppering their speech with (bastardized) French phrases and referring to one another as *monsieur* and *madame.* The "common people" (*prostonarod'e*) who sold eggplant and mackerel at the Greek bazaar engaged in such affectations as well, even when violent scuffles broke out, resulting in court appearances:

> "*Monsieur* justice of the peace, *Monsieur* Petrov here pulled my hair at the market. Ask *Monsieur* policeman."
>
> "That is true, *Monsieur* justice of the peace, but *Madame* Sidorov started it by striking me in the face with her mackerel. Just ask *Monsieur* Janitor."[139]

Aspirations for cultural refinement did not preclude the use of fish for violent ends, and the impish Odessit sought to shroud his behavior with a veneer of sophistication.

The Odessit was also verbose, both in his speech and in the way he conveyed his thoughts and opinions through his body language. Doroshevich maintained that *odesskii iazyk* was "the language of authentic chatterboxes [*iazyk nastoiashchikh boltunov*]—a language that is free, like the wind."[140] But the Odessit's incomprehensible Russian, according to Arkadii Averchenko, often compelled him to speak with his hands. If you do not understand what he is trying to say, his hands will "gesticulate with the rapidity of a windmill" until he gets his point across.[141] Verbosity accompanied by rapid gesticulations are considered to be common Jewish traits, and such stereotypes figure prominently in representations of Jews, both in derogatory images with anti-Semitic overtones, and in the self-portrayals often found in Jewish literature and anecdotes. *Odesskii iazyk* thus had an implicitly Jewish dimension, manifested by the way the Odessit expressed his views.

The Jewishness of *odesskii iazyk* is also revealed by the Yiddish vocabulary that made its way into the local dialect of Russian. In 1911 Faust's column reproduced a conversation that allegedly took place between two "cavaliers" (*kavalery*) in one of the Moldavanka's many bars:

> "Ponimaesh Petia, on khotel menia vziat' na *'farmoire.'* . . . A ia ne ispugalsia. . . . Kak 'zvizdanul' ego tak, i on azh perekinuls'ia."

"On dumal, chto ty '*iold.*' Vot i sel v galoshu. . . ."

"Ia emu tak spel '*zets,*' chto on budet pomnit'."

"Do you understand, Petia, he wanted to '*scare the hell out of me.*' . . . But I wasn't afraid. . . . So I socked him so hard he keeled over."

"He thought that you were a '*chump*' and that's how he got himself into a fix. . . ."

"I gave a '*punch*' that he will remember."[142]

Several Yiddish words are used in this dialogue (*farmoire,* meaning "fear"), (*iold,* meaning "chump"), (*zets,* meaning "punch"), with two of them having violent overtones. Faust simply titled his column "Odesskii iazyk," thereby suggesting that such discourse was characteristic of the entire city.[143] A verbally aggressive brand of Jewishness was embedded within the language of Odessa, constituting part of its very essence.

Like the Odessit himself, *odesskii iazyk* was also defined by its criminality. According to Vlas Doroshevich, when Odessans say they are going home, they state that they are going "through the window" (*cherez fortochku*), whereas in the rest of Russia "only thieves enter homes 'through the window.'"[144] Common Russian words also took on new meanings, conveying a sense of the depraved and corrupt people who inhabited the city. For the benefit of visitors to Odessa, Faust compiled an Odessan dictionary (*odesskii slovar'*) so that tourists "can get better acquainted with our city." The fifty-odd entries included:

Commercial firm—see swindler (*zhulik*)

Forgery (*fal'sifikatsiia*)—an old acquaintance of Odessa

Garden (*sad*)—the stock-exchange (*birzha*) for prostitutes

Honor—a rarity in Odessa

Money—The god of Odessans

Store (*magazin*)—a trap for cleaning out your pockets (*lovushka dlia ochistki karmanov*)

Rat—an honored citizen of Odessa

Swindler—see commercial firm[145]

Words that may have seemed familiar in Odessa concealed linguistic traps, intended to exploit naïve and unsuspecting travelers.

Navigating Odessa's streets could be deceptive without the proper training in the local idiom, and *Krokodil* also sought to provide its readers with a "lesson" in *odesskii iazyk.* The journal offered a total of seven words, perhaps implying that knowing the true meaning of these terms was sufficient for survival in Odessa:

Idea—scheme (*kombinatsiia*)
Incident—scandal (*le scandal*)
Youth—victim (*le fraer*)
Ticket—a free pass (*le kontromarka*)
Dreams—abscess, plague (*makes*)
Dreamer—fool (*le durak*)
Good-bye—get lost (*poshel von*)[146]

Krokodil's "instruction manual" suggests several important things about *odesskii iazyk* and the people who spoke it. First, Russia's Eldorado was a land of fantasy, and those who dreamt of wealth were dreaming a fool's dream. Second, criminal argot and Yiddish are both vital components of the language, with *fraer* being thieves' cant for a dupe and *makes* being Yiddish (and Hebrew) for abscess, plague, or scourge. Third, the criminality and vulgarity of *odesskii iazyk* are cloaked by a façade of culture, as the use of the French article *le* is intended to demonstrate the Odessit's affectation of European respectability.

The production of *odesskii iazyk* dictionaries added another dimension to the Odessa myth. Defining words was an alternative means of defining the Odessit himself: criminal, deviant, and alien but superficially coated in civility. Most important, *odesskii iazyk* was funny, abounding in the self-deprecating humor of a people who enjoyed showcasing their reputed criminality and deviance, which lay beneath this layer of refinement. Faust saw this as a cause for celebration rather than condemnation, and Odessa's mythmakers further canonized the notion of Odessa's uniqueness through a lexicographical representation of its language.

Revolution and Civil War

By the collapse of the tsarist government in 1917 the Odessa myth had come of age. Building upon the foundational cultural tropes laid out during the nineteenth century, the mythmakers of the late tsarist era further enriched, reproduced, and disseminated the myth through numerous newspapers, journals, and novels. Notwithstanding the grim reality of poverty and crime, mythmakers depicted Odessa and its people through the language of humor rather than solemnity and censure. To be sure, *Odesskaia pochta*'s journalists regularly called for political and economic reform in an effort to better the living conditions of the destitute and the downtrodden. But wit and irony remained their chosen instruments for constructing the multifaceted image of Odessa as gilded, sinful, criminal, and Jewish. This process would continue during the ensuing years of violence and political turmoil.

Between 1917 and 1920 Odessa was plunged into revolution and civil war. As with much of the Russian Empire, the city experienced an almost total breakdown of its political institutions, economy, and social fabric. Odessa may have been far from the decisive events taking place in Petrograd and Moscow, but its

ethnic makeup, centrality as a port, and location in politically volatile southern Ukraine meant that the three years between Imperial collapse and Bolshevik victory were particularly turbulent.[147] Power changed hands eight times in Odessa during the civil war. The Red Army battled its numerous adversaries, including Denikin's White Army and Petliura's Ukrainian nationalists. Given that the Russian Revolution occurred in the midst of World War I, many of the empire's allies and opponents had armies located in southern Ukraine and the Black Sea region. The Germans, the Austrians, and the French each staked a claim in influencing the outcome of Russia's civil war, and Odessa's location made the city a propitious choice from which to launch their geopolitical intrigues. With all these forces vying for control of the city, few of Odessa's nine governments remained in office (insofar as an "office" existed) for more than a few months.[148]

According to Odessa's press, crime significantly increased during this period as well. The social dislocations caused by World War I[149] and the civil war, compounded by the disintegration of the city's administration, meant more destitution, more misconduct, and no effective government capable of policing the streets.[150] Violent crimes were also on the rise, peaking in the winter of 1919, with *Odesskaia pochta* reporting at least one murder daily during the first four months of the year. As the situation deteriorated, headlines proclaiming that "the city is at the mercy of bandits" became more frequent.[151] Criminal activity was further fueled by the general amnesty for political prisoners decreed by the Russian Provisional Government in March 1917; the lines between criminal and revolutionary activity were fuzzy, with bandits invoking the language of class conflict to justify robbery. Separating rapacious crooks from selfless anarchists was not always a straightforward process, and the use of linguistic manipulation to defend delinquency continued unabated. One journalist maintained that "thousands of criminals" walked free with the Revolution and quickly worked their way down to Odessa from Siberian exile.[152]

Odessa's criminals, in fact, publicly eschewed stealing from the poor, using the popular press to market themselves as modern-day Robin Hoods. In January 1919 *Odesskaia pochta* published a letter of "protest" from the "representatives [*predstaviteli*] of the criminal world," in which they demanded that all of Odessa's bandits leave the impoverished working class alone and confine themselves to robbing the rich:

> Comrade-criminals [*Tovarishchi-vory*]!
>
> For the second and final time, we, representatives of the criminal world, are appealing to you to stop robbing poor people. . . . If you continue such attacks against the poor and the working class, we will deal with you in the most merciless manner. Perhaps you do not understand that by robbing workers you are depriving the most needy people of their livelihood. The worker earns his money by the sweat of his brow, and

> in one fell swoop you seize his entire weekly or even monthly earnings. We have already received numerous tearful letters insisting that we take measures to prevent such pillaging, otherwise the working class will take the law into their own hands and summarily invoke justice against the city's criminals. . . . Thus we warn all of you to stop what you are doing, or we will be compelled to take the most severe actions against you.[153]

Robbing the poor was branded as theft, but pillaging the rich could be vindicated as revolutionary expropriation. And though it remains unclear as to whether the leaders of the underworld were motivated by compassion or by shrewd calculation, adopting the language of class facilitated the perpetuation of their power on the streets of Odessa.

More insight into the manipulation of revolutionary discourse can be gained through an examination of Moisei (Moishe) Vol'fovich Vinnitskii, a Jewish gangster from Odessa, who operated under the pseudonym Mishka Iaponchik (Mike the Jap—so nicknamed because of his slanted eyes).[154] Moishe-Iakov Vinnitskii was born in October 1891 to Meer-Vol'f Mordkovich and Dora Zalmanovna Vinnitskii, a poor Jewish couple who lived on Zaporozhskaia Street in the Moldavanka.[155] By the age of fourteen Moishe was already involved in the world of crime, joining a street gang called *Molodaia volia,* an extortion racket that demanded money from the city's rich in the name of revolution. Some evidence suggests that Iaponchik formed a self-defense force in 1905 to protect the Jews on his street from marauding pogromists.[156] In 1907 Iaponchik was arrested while visiting a brothel. Convicted of burglary, he was sentenced to twelve years of hard labor in Siberia. But he was released after serving ten, through the general amnesty of March 1917, perhaps indicating that his transgressions were considered political rather than criminal. Returning to Odessa, Iaponchik organized the city's underworld, allegedly gaining control over twenty thousand bandits, prostitutes, and pimps.[157] He made the Moldavanka his headquarters, where he opened up his own restaurant, the Monte-Karlo, on Miasoedovskaia Street.[158] Iaponchik became known as the king of Odessa's gangsters, reaching the pinnacle of his power during the first quarter of 1919, when French troops occupied Odessa but tenuously maintained their grip on the city's shattered infrastructure.

As in 1905, Mishka Iaponchik invoked revolutionary discourse as well as Jewish self-defense to legitimate his violent and criminal activities. When the Bolsheviks took control of Odessa for the second time, in April 1919, they declared war on the city's underworld. Iaponchik used this opportunity to assert his revolutionary credentials, fearing that his power base would be swiftly liquidated. He turned to the printed word, circulating a personal statement to the press, in which he presented himself in such a way that would be pleasing to the Bolsheviks, yet also agreeable to the Jews of Odessa.[159] He repeatedly insisted that he was fighting for the cause of the poor, robbing *only* the bourgeois capitalist exploiters. Against charges of

banditry, he asked to be judged by the workers and peasants, the vanguard of the Revolution:

> I place myself before the court of workers and peasants, the revolutionary laborers from whom I am waiting an honest evaluation of my activities against the terror of the enemies of the working class [*na strakh vragam trudiashchikhsia naroda*].[160]

Iaponchik was speaking the language of Bolshevism, clearly demonstrating a familiarity with revolutionary discourse. And although he never mentioned that he was Jewish, nor that he was fighting for the rights of Russian Jewry, Iaponchik subtly weaved his Jewishness into his well-crafted letter. On two occasions he mentioned his participation in the struggle against pogromists, allegedly coordinating his activities with the "Jewish armed detachment" (*Evreiskaia boevaia druzhina*).[161] Yet even his defense of Odessa's Jews was described through a Bolshevik lens: he offered his manpower to prevent pogroms in "the working-class districts," never suggesting that anything other than class consciousness was fueling his drive to help the unfortunate Jewish victims.[162] Any doubt over Iaponchik's own Jewish background was dispelled when he signed this letter "Moisei Vinnitskii under the alias of Mishka Iaponchik."[163] "Moisei," the Russianized variant of Moishe, is always a Jewish name and, given that he was better known throughout Odessa as Mishka Iaponchik, its usage was entirely gratuitous. In an era when using a revolutionary pseudonym was standard practice, Iaponchik consciously chose to reveal in print his given name and, by extension, his Jewish background. Iaponchik's imagined self was a loyal Soviet soldier who was protecting the Jews of Russia within the framework of a workers' revolution.

But mere statements of loyalty were not sufficient for the Communists. Faced with the prospect of elimination, Iaponchik approached the Bolsheviks and offered to organize his "army" of criminals into a military battalion, agreeing to fight Petliura's troops who were then threatening New Russia.[164] In June 1919 Iaponchik's criminal syndicate was transformed into the Fifty-fourth Regiment of the Ukrainian Soviet Army, consisting of twenty-four hundred bandits-turned-soldiers.[165] What happened to them in the battlefield largely remains a mystery.[166] Most sources maintain that the troops fled for Odessa during the heat of battle near the city of Voznesensk that July. Bolshevik forces subsequently ambushed Iaponchik at the local train station where he was shot for his treachery.

Iaponchik's ephemeral career as a bandit, revolutionary, and defender of Jews is significant insofar as it illustrates the continuing tendency among Odessa's thieves to manipulate ideologies and fashion identities in order to justify their criminal acts. As we have seen, this practice was occurring before the 1917 Revolution and figured prominently in Kuprin's fictional story, "An Insult." Like Kuprin's gangsters, Mishka Iaponchik claimed to have been offended by malevolent accusations of banditry,

and he skillfully offered a rebuttal through the articulation of a class consciousness with a Jewish subtext. Beginning in the 1920s Odessa's mythmakers would inscribe Iaponchik into the myth of old Odessa, and by adding charm and wit to their depictions of him, the Moldavanka's gangster-king would be transformed into the archetypal Odessit, the personification of Russia's city of sin.

Thus far, our examination of the civil war era in Odessa suggests that anxiety over crime and urban decay radically increased during this period. Yet Odessa did not lose its sense of humor. Newspapers and journals continued to depict the city and its inhabitants through satire and irony, and soaring violence did not preclude comical representations of thieves. Odessa's mythmakers received reinforcements from elsewhere in Russia, as many writers, actors, singers, and artists came to Odessa, perhaps for the sun or perhaps in flight from the Bolsheviks, who were then in control of the capitals.[167] To many observers it seemed as if Odessans remained indifferent to the chaos enveloping their city. One Austrian Officer noted in June 1918 the striking vivacity (*zhivost´*), carelessness (*besspechnost´*), and gusto (*ozhivlennost´*) that seemed to characterize the city's inhabitants.[168] The poet Don-Aminado maintained, in 1920, that "the city wanted to live for today, it did not care what will happen tomorrow."[169] Revolution and civil war apparently did not embitter the Odessit; he continued to live the notorious life of revelry for which he was already known.

The production of Odessan humor received a boost in 1919, with the inauguration of the short-lived satirical periodical called *Pero v spinu* (*Quill in the Back*).[170] With its tagline reading "uncensored and generally suspicious," the journal poked fun at all aspects of civil war–era Odessa, including crime, politics, and debauchery. One issue "announced" a variety show put on by "robbers and bombers" (*naletchiki i bombisty*). Leading the festivities were Son'ka Zolotaia Ruchka and Kol'ka Iaponchik, both of whom were actual criminals from Odessa's past.[171] Their routine included the "Dance of Death," the "Polka Limonka," and the "Quadrille Malina."[172] Odessa's bandits did not merely rob; they also entertained, thus collapsing the distinction between thief and performer, as well as victim and spectator.

Crime also figured prominently in *Pero v spinu*'s fictional classified section. One issue included an advertisement from an inhabitant who asked "the robber, who wishes to steal from me, I implore you not to; I cannot endure it."[173] Another ad was "submitted" by an industrious cooperative of gangsters that had recently launched a consultation business:

> Offering advice and assistance. The First Odessan Cooperative of Burglars [*artel´ naletchikov*] offers the consultative services of our experienced specialists. Fee reductions for those in need.[174]

Even Odessa's thieves felt the pinch of wartime conditions and were required to branch out professionally, volunteering their practical experience to novices who

were considering crime as a prospective career path. And in the spirit of revolutionary brotherhood, they were prepared to offer discounts to the destitute.

One individual who sought the advice of professional thieves was Shulim Bul'bis, a fictional Jewish character from the town of Tul'chin, depicted by *Odesskaia pochta*'s Faust in an extended couplet published in January 1919.[175] Shulim Bul'bis (whose name may be translated as "Shulim the Potato")[176] was an impoverished traditional Jew with fifteen children he could not feed. After failing at multiple careers, Shulim was forced to try his luck at crime. Shulim sought out veteran criminals in a local café, who taught him the ways of the gangster and furnished him with a revolver. But misfortune continued to plague the hapless schlimazel, whose sole attempt at robbery ended in a comical fiasco. Brandishing his pistol, Shulim ordered a carriage to stop, shouting, "Hands up! Give me your wallet!" The passenger, however, turned out to be an acquaintance of the would-be highwayman. "Shulim Bul'bis, what's this, why? You're a robber, aye-aye-aye!" he declared with astonishment. Shulim was not fazed, and he threatened to shoot his victim if he failed to cooperate. But disaster struck Shulim when the passenger offered his snuff box; Shulim pried open the lid, took a pinch, and was overpowered by a violent sneeze. When he came to his senses, the carriage was gone, leaving Shulim with no plunder and, accordingly, no means of supporting his starving family. Resigned to his fate, Shulim resolved to let God take care of him.

Faust's portrayal of Shulim's escapades is filled with Jewish humor and cultural motifs in the tradition of Osip Rabinovich and Sholem Aleichem. Shulim is a classic *luftmentsh,* a jack-of-all-trades, whose many failed vocational pursuits were all typical Jewish professions, described poetically by Faust in Yiddish-inflected verse: "*shadkhen, batkhen, bel'fer* . . . and a *Shames* in the end," which are, respectively, a matchmaker, a master of ceremonies for wedding receptions, a Jewish day-school teacher, and a synagogue attendee. Shulim the schlimazel did not succeed in remaking himself into a ferocious and suave gangster. Even with a gun, Shulim was consumed with fear, his entire body "shaking like a leaf." Lacking the courage to commit robbery, Shulim turned to his piety for strength, chanting *shma Isroel* (Hear o Israel), one of the most important prayers in Judaism. And perhaps reminiscent of Sholem Aleichem's Tevye the Dairyman, Shulim retained his faith despite his troubles, confident that God will never abandon him.

Shulim Bul'bis is both the classic shtetl Jew and a typical character of a humorous Odessa-centered narrative. He is entrepreneurial, loyal to tradition and family, and naïvely optimistic despite his (often comical) misfortunes. And like Sholem Aleichem's Menakhem-Mendl and Osip Rabinovich's Reb Khaim-Shulim, Odessa's criminality proved to be too much for him to handle. Shulim Bul'bis from Tul'chin could not become an Odessit, and his ultimate failure is depicted with humor, intended to entertain readers rather than bemoan the tragedy of war-torn and crime-ridden Odessa.

The civil war era did not mark a radical shift in the production of the Odessa myth, despite economic collapse, political upheaval, and an increase in criminal activity. Representations of Odessa as Russia's most gilded, wicked, and funny city continued to flourish between the collapse of the tsarist empire and the triumph of Soviet power. Criminals donning the cloak of social revolution and schlemiels seeking success in Odessa's underworld remained topics of discussion for Odessa's mythmakers, who depicted their crumbling city and the eccentric Odessit through the irony and wit that had already made them famous.

The Jewish City of Sin Comes of Age

The period from 1905 to 1920 was a critical era for the development of the Odessa myth. Through memoirs, newspapers, anecdotes, and literature, mythmakers depicted the thieves and other deviant characters who shaped and were shaped by Odessa's depraved landscape. The Odessit emerged as a stock character, whose thoughts were consumed with fleecing the naïve, continuous merrymaking, and the showcasing of his knavish uniqueness through his funny way of speaking and his talent for manipulating crowds with his magnetic personality. Old Odessa, the Odessit, and *odesskii iazyk* were not invented during this period; their foundations had been laid in the nineteenth century by the numerous travelers and settlers who set the stage through their depictions of Odessa as both Eldorado and Gomorrah, gilded and sinful. But the myth's sustainability was only achieved in the early twentieth century, once its production and dissemination had reached a critical and unprecedented level. By 1920 the Odessa myth had become firmly entrenched in the city's identity and notoriety, thereby ensuring its survival through the Soviet era and beyond.

The relationship between the myth and reality became more complicated during this era as well, particularly in the realm of criminal activity. Techniques of linguistic manipulation, the co-optation of radical ideologies, and the use of humor were all characteristics of fictional thieves as well as actual criminals, whose escapades were described in memoirs and on the pages of *Odesskaia pochta.* Odessa's mythmakers surely knew this, and were thus complicit in blurring the line between fact and fiction. Faust regularly published articulate letters from thieves who may or may not have really existed, "reproduced" comical dialogue between Odessa's swindlers, and parodied the Odessit's behavior through couplets, anecdotes, travel guides, and dictionaries. Odessa's burgeoning reputation as a city of both opulence and deviance undoubtedly served as a magnet to attract devious seekers of wealth and debauchery from other cities in Russia, who streamed into Odessa to partake in the chaos. Myth and reality reinforced each other; those who depicted Odessa through the pen manipulated reality to enrich the myth, and those who actually partook in the crime and the revelry co-opted the myth to justify their depravity.

In many respects, Odessa had become a Jewish city. Making up one-third of the population, Jews figured prominently among Odessa's mythmakers as well as Odessa's gangsters and swindlers. Writers like Faust and Semen Iushkevich embedded Jewish cultural motifs and humor into the mannerisms, behavior, and speech patterns of their characters. The significant contribution of Aleksandr Kuprin—neither Jewish nor Odessan by birth—suggests that even an ethnic Russian could play an important role in the myth's construction. Jewishness diffused in Odessa, and the primary vehicle for this diffusion was wit, first brought to the city by Osip Rabinovich, Sholem Aleichem, and other nineteenth-century Jewish writers. Linguistic manipulation, Talmudic logic, and a Yiddish-inflected Russian became the dominant mode of discourse for the Odessit. Odessa was marked as a city of crooks and profligates who were also humorous, but it was a humor whose origins lay in the Yiddish-speaking shtetls of the Pale of Settlement.

CHAPTER 3 *The Battle for Old Odessa*

The Bolsheviks took power in Odessa for the third and final time in February 1920, after three turbulent years of political chaos, social upheaval, and economic collapse. They immediately announced the dawn of a new era for the city, promising an end to the crime, debauchery, and frivolity of "old Odessa." With Marxism as their guiding ideological framework, they slated Odessa for transformation into a model Soviet city—proletarian, industrious, and cultured. There was to be little tolerance for the bawdy "Odessa nights" described by Jacob Adler, the womanizing and swindling of Leon Drei, and the vulgar music of Sashka the Fiddler. For the Bolsheviks, the uninhibited revelry of the prerevolutionary Moldavanka was rooted in a combination of petty bourgeois criminality, destitution, and ignorance, all of which had no place in their envisioned workers' paradise. Through a relentless struggle, "Odessa-Mama"—the maternal bosom that nurtured thieves and rogues—would be no more; in its wake would emerge an Odessa of beauty, a pearl by the sea stripped of its most ideologically objectionable elements.

Yet despite the puritanically transformative intentions of Soviet Communism and many of its ideologues, the myth of old Odessa continued to flourish well into the 1930s, albeit in a form altered by the changing political and social circumstances. Building upon the foundations laid before the Revolution, a new generation of mythmakers produced and disseminated new tales of Russia's fabled Eldorado and its comically dashing con men, whose amalgamation of amusement, opulence, and duplicity made Odessa into an alluring city of sin. Celebrated writers and entertainers, such as Isaac Babel, Il'ia Il'f, Evgenii Petrov, Leonid Utesov, and many lesser-known figures brought the Odessa myth to an ever increasing number of people, once they had left their native Odessa in the early 1920s for Moscow and its greater cultural opportunities. And their immense popularity throughout the Soviet Union ensured the survival of the Odessit and his inimitable language and wit even as the mounting censorship of the Stalin era sought to dismantle old Odessa piece by piece.

The imagined Odessit matured during this period as well. His Jewishness became more implicit and subtle. The use of Yiddish inflections and cultural motifs was still pervasive, but it was no longer as obvious. The attempted Sovietization of Jewish culture and the government's changing policy toward the Jews undoubtedly played a role in this shift. But it was also rooted in the increasingly sophisti-

cated techniques of Odessa's preeminent mythmakers, who embedded Yiddishisms without using Yiddish words, Jewishness without identifying their characters as Jews, and shtetl types who remained outside the shtetl. By 1930 the Odessit had also ceased to be a generic character, a Jewish rogue without a proper name and identity. Isaac Babel's Benia Krik and Il'f and Petrov's Ostap Bender became the archetypal Odessans, emblems of the city's humor, criminality, and charisma. Old Odessa's enemies now faced challenging opponents, whose subtlety, sophistication, and immense popularity made them difficult to eliminate.

But with the greatest of ironies, the Soviet assault against old Odessa actually reinforced certain aspects of the myth. Labeling the Odessit as criminal, his language as thieves' cant, his music as decadent, his humor as frivolous, and his city as wicked merely perpetuated prerevolutionary depictions of the city. The myth's refraction through a Bolshevik lens may have led to its condemnation rather than its celebration, but old Odessa's detractors frequently launched their attacks through the sardonic wit that had made Odessa famous. The myth's intersection with the major trends and policy shifts of the interwar era fundamentally influenced the tone and manner in which old Odessa was depicted. But silence, not censure, ultimately proved to be the myth's greatest adversary, and it was only during Stalin's final decade of rule that mythologizing Odessa-Mama was briefly obliterated from public view.

Odessa's Jewish Community under Soviet Rule

For Odessa's Jews, the Revolution brought about important changes, including significant opportunities for political participation, cultural expression, and social mobility. Jews assumed leading roles in local and regional government. Jan Gamarnik, for instance, served as the chairman of the regional branch of the Communist Party between 1920 and 1923.[1] Odessan Jewry also benefited from *korenizatsiia,* the Soviet government's official nationality policy. Like other ethnic minorities in the USSR, the Jews had the right to use their native language (Yiddish) and to promote their culture in public institutions and through officially sanctioned channels, so long as it was "socialist in content."[2] The Jewish section of the Communist Party established ten Jewish schools in Odessa, with Yiddish serving as the primary language of instruction. According to Igal Kotler, 22 percent of the city's students were enrolled in Jewish schools in 1926.[3] A Yiddish theater was also opened, with a repertoire similar to its larger counterpart in Moscow. And like its Moscow counterpart, it existed until it was shut down in the late 1940s, a casualty of the Stalinist anti-cosmopolitan campaign.[4] The Jewish share in the population remained relatively constant throughout the interwar era: in 1926, 156,243 residents were Jewish, making up 36.4 percent of all inhabitants.[5] In 1939, there were nearly 201,000 Jews in the city, exactly one-third of the population.[6]

Only Moscow, Leningrad, and Kiev had larger Jewish communities, but their share in the total population was lower.[7] Odessa thus retained its Jewish character up until the Second World War.

Before the Revolution, observers had branded Odessa a "Jewish city," but not just any Jewish city. Odessa stood out from all others because of its reputation as a wicked city overrun with Jewish gangsters, vagrants, and swindlers. In chapter 2 we saw how there was an empirical basis for these charges, with Jews heavily involved in smuggling, counterfeiting, and other forms of nonviolent crimes. With the establishment of Soviet power, criminality in Odessa did not disappear, despite Bolshevik attempts to decimate the city's underworld. Although it is difficult to draw any firm conclusions, evidence suggests that prerevolutionary patterns of criminality persisted well into the 1920s. Jewish crooks crossed paths with the new authorities, running afoul of the Soviet legal system and the new mores imposed by Soviet ideology.

Just as Jewish criminality in the prerevolutionary era must be evaluated with regard to the idiosyncrasies of Imperial Russia, illicit activities among the Jews during the 1920s must be viewed within the new socioeconomic and ideological context of the USSR. Lenin's inauguration of the New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1921 signified the beginnings of a period of constrained capitalism—private trade would be permitted for some time in order to contend with social dislocation and rampant shortages, and the government would continue to debate the best approach toward constructing a socialist economy. But many party leaders distrusted those who engaged in private enterprise and feared that concessions to capitalism, however small and transitory, would be the death knell of communism. Viewing private enterprise as immoral and damaging to the state's interests, the government often vacillated in its level of tolerance toward capitalist activity and constantly readjusted the murky boundaries that separated acceptable from unacceptable (and, accordingly, legal from illegal) economic practices. A fine line was drawn between trading and smuggling, between entrepreneurship and black marketeering, between the legitimate merchant and the fraudulent swindler. The entrepreneurs of the NEP era, known as Nepmen, led a precarious existence, conducting their activities under the vigilant gaze of a distrustful Communist Party. The government regarded the Nepmen with contempt; they were branded unscrupulous speculators and were often disenfranchised, charged with undermining the Soviet Union's progress toward socialism.[8]

Prerevolutionary Russian Jews were disproportionately part of what may be called, in crude Marxist terms, the "middle class." As artisans, large-scale merchants, petty traders, innkeepers, professionals, and intellectuals, but with a small proletariat and a negligible peasantry, the Jews did not fit the Bolsheviks' conception of a "healthy" ethno-national community.[9] The Revolution could not and did not

transform the socioeconomic structure of the Jews overnight, and, not surprisingly, Jews figured prominently in the ranks of Nepmen. Historians have estimated that Jews made up as much as 45 percent of those disenfranchised (known as *lishentsy*) in Ukraine, despite comprising a mere 5 percent of the Republic's population.[10]

The semi-criminalization of trade during NEP and the fluid categories used to label the semi-criminal elements who practiced it entail a circumspect approach toward Soviet sources, archival or otherwise. Patterns of Jewish criminality in Odessa (or, for that matter, any other group anywhere in the USSR) must be seen in this light. For example, a police surveillance report from 1923 on "banditry" in the Odessa region, identifies several dozen traders and artisans, including many Jews, who were accused of engaging in their trades without the proper permits.[11] Were they shirking the state, or had they gone through proper channels only to be denied the right to work in these un-Soviet professions? It is difficult to tell. In 1927 an article in one local newspaper used the term *liudi vozdukha*—a Russianization of the Yiddish term *luftmentshn*—to describe criminals, even though the term's prerevolutionary usage implied a hapless jack-of-all-trades who may have been a shady character but one who could have operated perfectly within the law.[12] Accordingly, conclusions drawn from such sources must be regarded as tentative at best.

Keeping these reservations in mind, however, certain patterns of criminal activity in the Odessa region during the 1920s can be detected. According to local newspaper reports, crime in the city was rampant during the first half of the decade, particularly in the Jewish Moldavanka region. The Bolshevik government repeatedly declared war against the bandits, gangs, and extortionists who "terrorized" the population.[13] There are numerous police reports and court cases against Jews, and the crimes that appear with the greatest frequency largely mirror those of the prerevolutionary era. Jews were often accused of smuggling contraband across the Romanian border through neighboring Bessarabia, with currency figuring prominently among the illicit items transported, bought, and sold.[14] Bessarabia had formerly been a Russian province, but was handed over to independent Romania after the First World War. With the former Pale of Settlement parceled out to different states, Russian Jews likely retained connections across these borders, thereby facilitating transnational smuggling.[15] The production and selling of forged documents and money were equally common among Odessan Jews, just as it had been before the Revolution.[16] In cases where Jews and non-Jews collaborated in organized crime, Jews tended to work as fences, buying and selling stolen goods, rather than stealing the goods themselves.[17]

Criminal reports also suggest that Jewish government employees in Odessa often used their official positions to commit fraud, bribery, and graft. The Bolshevik Revolution gave Russian Jewry unprecedented opportunities for state employment; the new regime needed a civil service comprised of individuals with

at least a rudimentary education, and in many regions the Jews were the only ones who could effectively staff the burgeoning Soviet bureaucracy.[18] In February 1923 V. Rozenblat and S. Itskovich were arrested for embezzlement and "lining their pockets," as employees of Gosparokhodstvo, a state-run shipping company, where Itskovich worked as the deputy accountant.[19] In December 1921 Avram Natanovich Levok and Boris Nusimovich Kamenichnyi were sentenced to be shot for forging and selling pension benefit documents, with Levok using his job at the state pension bureau to accrue the resources and skills necessary for their operation.[20] The 1920s were thus marked by Odessan Jewry's entry into a new category of crime, usually referred to as *prestuplenie v dolzhnosti,* which may be roughly translated as "malfeasance." For Odessa's Jews, forgery, bribery, and blackmail were not new offenses; what was new was the relationship between the accused and his role as an employee of the state.[21]

The Revolution changed the relationship between Odessan Jewry and the underworld in other ways as well. Career opportunities in law enforcement were now readily available, and a Jew could find himself on both sides of a criminal investigation. The three officials who signed off on police reports more than anyone else in 1923 were named Shvartsgorn, Shpigel', and Bronshtein—the police chief, an inspector, and a bookkeeper, respectively.[22] But a Jewish policeman need not imply an upstanding citizen, as the following case against Solomon Zaidenberg demonstrates.[23] Although Zaidenberg's colleague in the *militsiia* insisted that he had been a volunteer in the Red Army and "an active participant in the struggle against banditry, bootlegging, and other crimes," Zaidenberg was nevertheless accused of taking a bribe from a cattle thief.[24] Rather than deny the charges outright, Zaidenberg—in the tradition of Odessa's prerevolutionary Jewish criminals—manipulated the language of the law in his defense, insisting that the money was not a bribe, "but a gift of thanks for his hard work" (*a kak blagodarnost' za trudy za delo*).[25] And one of the most notorious Jews of the Stalin era, Naftalii Frenkel', was an Odessan by birth. Frenkel' epitomizes the fluid boundaries between criminal and state official during the interwar period: having been arrested for trading in contraband during NEP, he escaped execution and climbed the Stalinist ladder of success by devising an efficient system for administering the Soviet labor camp system.[26] The place of the Jew in Odessa's criminal realm changed with the Revolution in many important respects, but the types of crime he committed (white-collar and economic in nature) and the techniques he used to defend himself largely remained the same.

A New Generation of Mythmakers

The Jewish demographic, economic, intellectual, and criminal presence in Odessa during the 1920s thus exhibited many important continuities with the prerevolutionary period, despite the new political and ideological dimensions

introduced by Soviet power. But as we saw in previous chapters, demographic and socioeconomic realities do not fully explain why observers often labeled Odessa a "Jewish city," and why an Odessa myth infused with Jewish culture emerged at the turn of the century. Odessa was the first important center where Jewish writers adopted the Russian language for the production of novels, feuilletons, and anecdotes *without* abandoning their native Yiddish culture. The multiethnic immigrant character of the city was an ideal venue for the Jews to become more like their neighbors and for their neighbors to become more like the Jews. This dynamic process of fusion and cultural production did not cease with the Revolution, the civil war, and the NEP era. The mythmakers of the Soviet period emerged during this era of turmoil, and, in many respects, the intersection of war, politics, and culture enriched their sketches of old Odessa. Within a decade these writers and musicians would achieve a level of popularity throughout the USSR far eclipsing that of their predecessors, whose impact had largely been local. But, like their predecessors, it was Odessa that furnished them with their raw material.

Between 1917 and 1924 Odessa was a revolving door of writers and entertainers. Native Odessans came and went, departing to experience revolution and civil war, and to encounter the imagined cultural wonders of Moscow and Petrograd. Isaac Babel, Lev Slavin, and Leonid Utesov all left for a time, only to come back, and then leave again. While Babel and Slavin signed up with the Red Army to witness, partake, and understand the Bolsheviks' proclamation of a new epoch, Utesov sojourned in Moscow, giving northerners their first taste of his comedy and music.[27] Others, however, came to Odessa during the uncertain days of civil war, seeing the sun and the sea as a promising refuge from Bolshevism and the politicization of everyday life.[28] Teffi, Don-Aminado, Aleksei Tolstoi, and Ivan Bunin were among those who spent time in the city, briefly absorbing its atmosphere before quitting Russia for good, once Soviet power emerged triumphant.[29] But not everyone who sought out Russia's Eldorado were opponents of the new regime, as Konstantin Paustovskii's brief residence in Odessa demonstrates.[30] As one of the most significant propagators of the Odessa myth during the post-Stalin era, Paustovskii became an honorary Odessit, an integral part of the city's history and cultural landscape. Odessa was a gateway to and from Russia, a quick stopover for some, a temporary home for others. But for all who passed through, the city functioned as an incubator of ideas. And this short but tumultuous period subsequently proved to be a pivotal moment in the evolution of the Odessa myth.

The writers in Odessa during the civil war and the early days of NEP knew one another well and used common forums for discussing and disseminating their work. Many of them, including Babel, Slavin, Paustovskii, Iurii Olesha, and Eduard Bagritskii, published their first stories in the short-lived journal *Moriak* in the early 1920s.[31] As friends who shared the exuberance of youth in an era of

revolutionary expectations, along with a passion for literature and a desire for success, they created the so-called Poets' Collective" (*Kollektiv poetov*), an informal club that met frequently in people's apartments and cafés. In addition to Babel, Slavin, Bagritskii, and Olesha, Valentin Kataev, Semen Gekht, and Il'ia Il'f also partook in these literary gatherings.[32] Not all the young Odessan writers were Jewish, but many of them were, and, in a pattern already established during the prerevolutionary era with Aleksandr Kuprin, Odessa proved to be a conducive environment for the absorption of Jewish cultural motifs by ethnic Russians.[33] Such was the case with Konstantin Paustovskii and Evgenii Petrov, who became Il'ia Il'f's future collaborator. Whether Jew or Gentile, they were all approximately the same age, and they soaked up a common Odessan atmosphere. Babel, Slavin, Paustovskii, Il'f, and Petrov subsequently became the most important and celebrated mythmakers of old Odessa in Soviet literature, and these formative years in the city significantly informed their work.

But the fecundity of literary life in Odessa did not last, and by 1925 most of the famous Odessans of the Soviet era had abandoned their beloved city for Moscow, which promised greater opportunities for writers, musicians, and entertainers. Leonid Utesov was among the first to leave, departing in 1921; Il'f and Petrov left in 1923, independently of each other and unaware that a prolific and successful collaboration loomed on the horizon; Slavin and Babel left in 1924.[34] Gekht, Paustovskii, Bagritskii, and Olesha also left, along with many other lesser-known figures. Odessa had become culturally stagnant for them. In 1923 Babel wrote to a friend how "in Odessa there is nothing, I am the big fish in a small pond. . . . Everything here is particularly provincial. It was not like this before, but now everything is bad, ruined by provincialism."[35] One of Il'ia Il'f's friends recalls how Il'f wrote her a letter bewailing the successive departure of all his friends from Odessa: "they are heading northwards, southwards, and eastwards. Some are even going West. There are others who have merely disappeared. They come to me, say 'good-bye,' and then vanish."[36] Sergei Bondarin, another writer who also left Odessa around this time, describes how his friend Il'f went north "to live, to look for work, to go to the theater, to make friends, to attend lectures and debates. In short, to live a cosmopolitan life [*stolichnaia zhizn'*]; in Odessa there is nothing to do. To Moscow, to Moscow!"[37]

Those who remained behind in Odessa saw these departures as a misfortune, a blow to the humor and joy that had permeated the city's culture. In August 1927 Odessa's popular newspaper, *Vechernie izvestiia,* lamented how "many native Odessans have left for Moscow, and with them 'Odessan anecdotes' have migrated."[38] The near total abandonment of Odessa by its cultural elite was clearly demonstrated in January 1938 with the launching of a new local newspaper, *Bol'shevitskoe znamia.* With great fanfare, the inaugural issue published lau-

datory endorsements from "our compatriots" (*nashi zemliaki*)—Valentin Kataev, Konstantin Paustovskii, Lev Slavin, Semen Gekht, and Semen Kirsanov. Although each author praised Odessa and his fond memories of this remarkable city by the sea, each of their tributes had been received "by telegraph from Moscow."[39] Odessa remained dear to them emotionally and intellectually but apparently only from a distance.

But the journey to Moscow (and Leningrad for some) was an important step in their artistic growth and was equally critical for the myth of old Odessa's future cultivation. Many of these writers, including Il'f, Petrov, Slavin, and Kataev, continued to collaborate in Moscow, writing for the satirical journal *Gudok* between 1923 and 1925.[40] It was here that the friendship between Il'ia Il'f and Evgenii Petrov germinated. And it was here that they wrote their tour de force Ostap Bender stories, *The Twelve Chairs,* and *The Golden Calf.* Their Odessan past continued to influence their work, and their presence in Moscow abetted its popularization. Lev Slavin's play *Intervention* (*Interventsiia*), a humorous depiction of civil war–era Odessa, was first performed in Moscow's Vakhtangov Theater in 1933.[41] And it was in Leningrad in 1924—not in Odessa—that Leonid Utesov first encountered the works of Isaac Babel, which he immediately adapted for his stage performances.[42] Living in the capitals allowed Utesov to become the USSR's most celebrated jazz musician in the late 1920s, but many of his lyrics spoke of old Odessa, and his melodies bore traces of the Jewish klezmer music he had learned as a child. Odessa had physically lost its most talented admirers, but it was a necessary separation for the spread of its culture.

Most mythmakers may have migrated to the capitals, but others went abroad. The father of the revisionist wing of the Zionist movement, Vladimir Jabotinsky, grew up in Odessa, where he worked as a journalist, contributing to the local newspaper *Odesskie novosti.* Following the 1903 pogrom in Kishinev, he was involved in the formation of Jewish self-defense forces. Jabotinsky left Russia permanently during World War One, dedicating his life to the struggle for the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine.[43] Yet he abandoned neither his affinity for the Russian language nor his nostalgia for Odessa, as his semiautobiographical novel, *The Five,* first published in 1936, demonstrates.[44] Others left after the civil war: Abraham T'homi, a native Odessan and Zionist activist; Aminodav Peisakhovich Shpolianskii, a poet better known as Don-Aminado; Iurii Morfessi, a restaurateur and singer of gypsy romances; and Nadezhda Buchinskaia, a humorist who published under the pseudonym Teffi. All of them stayed in Odessa for the duration of the civil war but fled when it ended. And, from their new homes, they all made a literary journey back in time and place through evocative accounts of this turbulent era.[45]

In marked contrast to the prerevolutionary period, the production of the Odessa myth took place at multiple sites and in multiple settings: in national

journals, in Moscow's theaters, in Leningrad's concert halls, among émigrés in Paris, and in politically tumultuous Palestine. Mythmaking, however, did not cease in Odessa itself, notwithstanding the exodus of its most talented luminaries. Plays were regularly performed, including Slavin's *Intervention* and Babel's *Sunset* (*Zakat*).[46] During the 1920s Odessa's Russian-language newspapers regularly published Babel's stories alongside those by local writers.[47] Vivid depictions of the sordid escapades of criminal gangs and the feverish revelry associated with the Moldavanka District were common, and, although "Odessa-Mama" was frequently attacked for its decadence, the language, wit, and content of such pieces undoubtedly kept the Odessa myth alive in the minds of its readers.[48] For much of the interwar era mythmaking thus occurred at three different levels: locally, nationally, and outside the USSR. And its practitioners preserved, perpetuated, and enriched the tales of old Odessa inherited from the past.

The 1920s also witnessed a growing diversity in the media used for the myth's production and dissemination. Before the Revolution, mythmaking largely took place in newspapers, fiction, and memoirs. Such channels continued to be important during the Soviet era, but now they were complemented by theater, film, and musical recordings. Technological advances brought pictures and sounds to depictions of old Odessa, and Soviet distribution networks meant that Isaac Babel's Benia Krik and Leonid Utesov's renditions of criminal folksongs could be seen and heard practically anywhere in the USSR. Soviet censorship may have imposed certain ideological boundaries on the Odessa myth's content, but the advent of movies and recorded music, coupled with the immense popularity of Babel, Utesov, Il'f, and Petrov, meant a larger and more heterogeneous audience. Old Odessa now had a face and a voice that were accessible outside the city itself.

The most prolific period of mythmaking during the interwar period was the NEP era, when the Soviet government kept a relatively loose grip on the economy, society, and culture. The 1920s witnessed a veritable cultural explosion in literature and film, largely (but not completely) outside the state's control.[49] The more puritanical members of the Communist Party reacted with horror and contempt to what they saw as a revival of bourgeois decadence, capitalist excess, and unbridled frivolous entertainment.[50] But until the onset of the Stalinist 1930s, they largely remained at bay, verbally attacking the dissipated at every opportunity but unable to eliminate this avenue of popular culture. It was during the 1920s that Babel published most of the Jewish gangster stories from his Odessa cycle, and a film version titled *Benia Krik* was released in 1926. Il'f and Petrov's *The Twelve Chairs* was first published in 1928 serially and then in book form. In 1925 the Yiddish actor Solomon Mikhoels starred in the movie *Jewish Luck,* which depicted the adventures of Sholem Aleichem's Menakhem-Mendl in prerevolutionary Odessa.[51] And in the mid-1920s jazz music permeated Soviet society, spearheaded by Jewish musicians from southern Russia, with Leonid Utesov towering above the rest.[52]

In both the USSR and the United States, traditional Jewish klezmer music was an important influence on the development of jazz.[53] In the southern Pale of Settlement, particularly in Odessa and the adjacent regions of Bukovina and Bessarabia, Jewish folk melodies combined with those of the neighboring Slavic and Romanian peoples, resulting in a unique hybrid of danceable and improvised music.[54] Growing up in Odessa, where Jewish musicians performed in seedy taverns like Gambrinus, Leonid Utesov became enamored with this music and its rich heritage. Utesov later recalled: "on my way to school I would stop at the apartment of Gershberg, a fiddler, spending hours listening to his remarkable playing. It stirred something in me, giving me no rest. In the end I begged my parents for permission to take up the violin."[55] By the time of the Revolution, Utesov was traveling around the Pale giving stage performances as an entertainer, combining comedic skits and improvised music. His repertoire grew to include many of the lewd criminal folksongs (*blatnye pesni*) and street songs (*ulichnyi pesni*) that were popular during the 1920s, including "From the Odessa Jail" ("S odesskogo kichmana"), "Gop so smykom," and "Bagels" ("Bublichki"), recording a handful of them between 1929 and 1932.[56] Combining humorous lyrics that celebrated the chaos, crime, and debauchery of old Odessa with the melodies and the wailing fiddles and clarinets of klezmer music, Utesov brought the Odessa myth to the Soviet stage.[57] His popularity was so immense that he became, according to S. Frederick Starr, "probably the best-known man in the Soviet Union" after Stalin.[58]

Whether singing songs, writing novels, or making movies, the mythmakers of the interwar period had several important things in common. First, they were largely part of the same generation, born in the 1890s and reaching adulthood during "a time of great expectations" (as Konstantin Paustovskii put it), when revolutionary upheaval promised to usher in an era of social, economic, and cultural liberation, particularly for the Jews of Ukraine whose mobility had been impeded by tsarist legislation.[59] Second, they all spent some of their formative years in Odessa, absorbing the city's electrifying environment and the cultural legacy bequeathed to them by an earlier generation of mythmakers. Third—and much like the previous era—most of the mythmakers were Jewish, and those who were Gentiles adopted the motifs, humor, and language of the Odessa myth, which were largely rooted in Jewish culture. Fourth—and in contrast to the previous era—the new social, political, and cultural context of the Soviet era pushed and pulled most of the mythmakers out of Odessa. And through the wanderings of Babel, Il'f, Petrov, Utesov, Jabotinsky, and others, the myth of old Odessa ceased to be a local phenomenon.

Magical Old Odessa

The weaning of Odessa's mythmakers from the bosom of Odessa-Mama influenced the ways in which they depicted their city. Odessa was a land of magic for them, and they commemorated their city with great nostalgia and affection,

extolling its beauty and uncommonly lighthearted atmosphere. In Lev Slavin's story "Two Soldiers" ("Dva boitsa"), Arkadii Dziubin describes Odessa as a "wonderland" (*skazochnaia strana*), filled with a "powerful tribe" (*bogatyrskoe plemia*) of people living amid "an eternally blue sky and fragrant flowers."[60] It was a magnificent land, whose pleasure-drenched environment empowered its inhabitants. For Jabotinsky,

> the Odessa of my childhood imbued me with a sense of freedom. . . . There is no other Odessa like the Odessa of those bygone days with its gentle merrymaking and frivolous knavery hovering in the air, without any hint of spiritual confusion, without any shade of moral tragedy.[61]

Catastrophe, fatalism, and misery had no place in Odessa's playful collective consciousness, even during the chaotic times of war and revolution. "This is not a city," observed Teffi in 1919, "but one endless anecdote!" (*ne gorod, a sploshnoi anekdot!*).[62] And it was an exotic anecdote worth sharing with others, as Arkadii Dziubin did among his battalion at the front during the Great Patriotic War, and as Leonid Utesov did in his writings and music during the wintry nights of Moscow and Leningrad: "So long, farewell Odessa-Mama, thank you for giving birth to me."[63]

Old Odessa was imagined as magical and exotic because it overwhelmed the senses with sumptuous delicacies, intoxicating liquors, vibrant colors, and gigantic people. "The foamy waves of Odessa's sea throw onto the shore," Isaac Babel writes,

> big-bellied bottles of Jamaican rum, oily Madeira, cigars from the plantations of Pierpont Morgan, and oranges from the groves of Jerusalem, . . . olives that had come from Greece, Marseilles butter, coffee beans, Lisbon Malaga, . . . red watermelon with black seeds, slanting seeds like the eyes of sly Chinese girls.[64]

A profusion of contraband enveloped Odessa, and as a seaport of sin these otherworldly temptations were consumed with excessive relish. The calamities of the civil war brought on by marauding armies did not terminate the city's gastronomic gluttony, with fine restaurants springing up on every corner to cater to the many soldiers, gangsters, and entertainers who made Odessa their home. "Sprouting like mushrooms in the rain," remembers Morfessi, "restaurants and clubs opened in the best locations with the best chefs," complemented by gaming houses where croupiers dexterously plied their trade, "as if they had done this and nothing else for their entire lives."[65] Inspired by the splendor surrounding him, Morfessi opened up his own place.[66]

Odessa's healthy climate, abundant food, and endless opportunities for heretical merriment bred and nurtured a race of super Jews, whose stature, strength, and

virility gave them hegemony over neighboring Gentiles. Babel's Jewish gangsters ruled the city, towering above policemen and peasants. Froim Grach was as "strong as an ox. . . . Strength like you wouldn't believe! If you don't butcher an old man like that, he'll live forever. He had ten bullets in him and he was still going strong!"[67] Only in Odessa could a Jew become "a lion . . . a tiger . . . a cat . . . [who] can spend the night with a Russian woman and the Russian woman will be satisfied."[68] Only in Odessa could a Jewish prostitute be called "the Cossack" and have children who were as big as Cossacks themselves. The Jews radiated energy, which was reflected in the vibrant colors of their clothing. In "The King," the "Moldavanka aristocrats were jammed into crimson vests, their shoulders encased in chestnut-colored jackets, and their fleshy legs bulged in sky-blue leather boots."[69] Benia Krik appeared in public sporting a "chocolate jacket, cream pants, and raspberry-red half boots" (*shokoladnyi pidzhak, kremovye shtany i malinovye shtiblety*).[70] Petr Abramovich Garvi, a Menshevik who had been arrested for revolutionary activity in Odessa on the eve of the 1905 Revolution recalled, several decades later, the many Jewish bandits he had encountered in prison. Like Babel, Garvi uses vivid colors to portray them:

> Both horse thieves were Jewish. One had jet-black hair, with bright succulent lips which were surrounded by a handsome curly beard. The other one was fair-haired with a red moustache and dreamy eyes. . . . He was by his own admission not merely a horse thief, but a pimp as well.[71]

For Garvi, these Jewish criminals were a source of entertainment, a curious diversion from the realities of prison. He was intrigued by this effervescent culture previously unknown to him—a Jewish milieu but very different than the one he came from.

Many mythmakers defined Odessa's magnetism, abundance, and uniqueness by juxtaposing the city and its Jews with images of the dilapidated shtetls in the northern Pale of Settlement. In *Red Cavalry* Babel's narrator notes the frailty of the shtetl Jew, whom he encountered while riding with Semen Budennyi's Cossacks through Volhynia. As he describes it:

> Narrow-shouldered Jews hover sadly at crossroads. And the image of the southern Jews flares up in my memory—jovial, potbellied, sparkling like cheap wine. There is no comparison between them and the bitter aloofness of these long bony backs, these tragic yellow beards. In their fervent features, carved by torture, there is no fat or warm pulse of blood.[72]

Both *Red Cavalry* and Babel's wartime diary vividly depict the destruction of the East European shtetl and the victimized Jews who seemed to remain passively frozen in time and place, weighed down by centuries of a cultural tradition that revered learning and piety over action and belligerence. The Jews he describes are

"a pathetic little bunch of people with the beards of prophets."[73] They are old and pallid, drained of life and color. Most wear glasses, suggesting a universal Jewish disability. Images of death and decay are rampant. In Zhitomir a Hasidic Rebbe, once the mighty pillar of his community, was left abandoned in his hovel—"a stone room, empty as a morgue"—with few followers and no heirs to carry on his dynasty, unlike Benia Krik, whose "big-bellied wife [was] in her seventh or eighth month."[74]

Babel was not alone in describing the sorrowful and wretched shtetl. Eduard Bagritskii was also repulsed by the archetypal shtetl Jews, with their "lice-eaten braids . . . Pimples, a mouth, greased with herring . . . Hunchbacked, knotty, and wild."[75] Jabotinsky, who was a native Odessit like Babel and Bagritskii, was similarly struck by what he saw at the train stations in Galicia and Podolia during his journey to Europe.

> For the first time ever, I encountered the ghetto. I saw its decrepitude and decay [*vetkhost' i upadok*] with my own eyes. I heard the slavish humor, which the Jews used against their enemies, rather than launching a violent rebellion. Only later was I able to see the pride and bravery that lay beneath this groveling and mockery; but at the time I lowered my head and quietly asked myself—these are our people?[76]

The shtetl was cold and destitute; there was little to eat and little to nourish its starving Jews. In *Mottke, the Thief,* Sholem Asch describes the

> baskets with last year's apples, rotten pears and frost bitten plums. In the long winter nights the fruit in the baskets froze together and became one putrid mass. You couldn't recognize the different fruits any longer; they were all covered with a layer of mold and sent out a powerful smell that spread through the whole cellar, producing warmth.[77]

The shtetl was a frigid wasteland, and its traditional Jews seemed to suffer with apathy, while their empowered cousins in Odessa vigorously celebrated life through revelry and the procreation of more life, begetting a new generation of robust Jewish supermen.

But the shtetl Jew could become an Odessit by entering the city, which magically transformed the infirm and the disabled into strapping, healthy, and attractive beings. In one of Konstantin Paustovskii's stories, a Jewish man describes the landscape's curative power:

> In Odessa I cast to the devil my old habits, started to swim in the cool sea. . . . I often slept on the shore, shivered from the rain, dried myself under the sun, caught mackerel and goby, and in general lived a life that was inappropriate for an artisan, and particularly inappropriate for a Jew.

> I shaved my wispy beard and moustache, acquired a suntan, and stopped smoking weak cigarettes in favor of a strong pipe. With each day my body was increasingly saturated with the fresh air. I threw away my glasses and for long stretches of time I stared into the distance training my eyes on the horizon. My blindness started to diminish. . . . Women started to look at me with curiosity, whereas my previous appearance merely elicited scornful smiles or annoying indifference [*brezglivaia usmeshka ili obidnoe ravnodushie*].[78]

According to Simon Dubnow, hundreds of young Hasidic Jews ran away from Yeshiva against the will of their parents and flocked into "Godless Odessa" (*bezbozhnaia Odessa*).[79] They rejected tradition, much like Bagritskii's heroes:

> All this stood in my way
>
> Wheezing in my chest, whistling through my ailing bronchi:
>
> "Pariah! Take your poor belongings,
>
> Your cursedness and rejection!
>
> Run away!"
>
> I'm abandoning my old bed:
>
> "Should I leave?
>
> I'm going!
>
> Good riddance!
>
> I don't care!"[80]

A new life awaited those who came to Odessa and had the will to submit to the city's exhilarating and regenerative atmosphere.

Rejuvenation in Odessa transpired through revelry rather than learning, through humor rather than politics, and through music rather than prayer. The city was in constant flux, in perpetual celebration. In the words of Leonid Utesov:

> Along the dusty road appeared a city on fire [*gorod v ogniakh*], a bustling city, with a multitude of restaurants, cafés, taverns, shops [*lavchonok*], a city of unbearably intense heat by day, but by night a city of reckless [*besshabashnaia*] and wild [*razgul´naia*] abandonment. . . . I approached the city. Above Kulikova field the sky glowed fiery red from the booths of the traveling circuses. People converged here from the whole city, from the Peresyp, the Moldavanka, Slobodka-Romanovka, and the Zhevakhova Mountains. From morning until the wee hours of the night, they roamed from one booth to the next, fighting through the crowds to see the clowns in red wigs and the tightrope walkers.[81]

A festive atmosphere prevailed; one observer insisted that nothing "could extinguish the excitement on the streets, every time it is smothered, it rises up anew adorned in fresh colors."[82] Klezmer-inflected street songs filled the air; the refrain of Iakov Iadov's "Bagels" ("Bublichki"), which was "Odessa's cry and its hymn," could be heard on every corner.[83] The city resounded with jazz, as Utesov sang in his popular song "Limonchiki":

> Here jazz is thundering, the trumpets are playing
> The drums crash down joyfully
> The sounds whirl around tempestuously
> And immediately everybody wants to dance.[84]

Odessans were "hot-blooded and restless," as Don-Aminado put it, and their spirit could not be quashed.[85]

The rumbling and revelry of old Odessa was also attributed to the rampant criminality, imagined as a timeless constant in the city's life but culminating amid the anarchy of the revolutionary period. One criminal folksong, which subsequently appeared in a slightly modified form in Lev Slavin's *Intervention,* offers this description:

> Thunder rumbles and trumpets play,
> Odessa's policemen send out telegrams
> The Moldavanka has been captured by thieves[86]

Ivan Alekseev, a Socialist Revolutionary who spent time in Odessa, depicts the banditry of the civil war era in his memoirs:

> Notwithstanding the multitude of governments in place—or perhaps because of this multitude—the city was in the hands of anarchy. From five o'clock in the evening onward, people sought refuge in their apartments. Those who were brave enough to risk venturing out after this hour were immediately robbed at their doorways. Never before had Odessa's criminal dens [*malina*] celebrated [*torzhestvovat'*] as they did during those months. Dens of criminals were pillaging, the police were pillaging, counterespionage forces were pillaging. . . . Odessa was saturated with blood.[87]

But despite the danger, people "crawled out from their apartments in the evenings," maintains Teffi. She insists that Odessans

> went to the clubs, the theaters, and they scared each other with terrible rumors. For the return journey home, people would gather in groups and solicit protection—five students who were armed to the teeth. They

> hid their rings in their cheeks, their watches in their shoes. But all this helped little.[88]

Banditry did not impede the city's festive mood, and it even allowed Odessa's plenitude of exotic commodities to flourish in a time generally known for suffering and deprivation. In his novel *The Green Wagon* (*Zelenyi furgon*) Aleksandr Kozachinskii paints a rich portrait of one of Odessa's bazaars:

> [It] was overloaded with watermelons of all sorts . . . garlands of onions, blue eggplant, tenderly pink vessels in which the water stayed cool on the hottest day, new millets of besom, and other items. This was the visible bazaar. But inside this visible bazaar there existed another, hidden bazaar. At the hidden bazaar people bartered salt, sugar, and leather. The bazaar was filled with an air of apprehension, as things were bought and sold on the sly. The bazaar was subject to flashes of panic, confiscations, and sudden outbursts of gunfire. This was the bazaar of 1920.[89]

In marked contrast to the shtetls of the northern Pale, where *Red Cavalry*'s narrator laments "the death of the bazaar" and the "mute padlocks [that] hang on the stores," the markets of seaside southern Russia continued to flourish, thanks to its pervasive criminality.[90]

Mythmakers writing during the Soviet era continued to depict old Odessa as a Judeo-kleptocracy, with the successive regimes of the late tsarist and revolutionary periods governing in name only. In Babel's *Odessa Stories,* Benia Krik is "the King," and "levelheaded people" insist that "the police end where Benia begins," suggesting that the former are powerless to act without the latter's sanction.[91] The police want to decimate Benia Krik's army of gangsters, but they are afraid that any attack will fail and much "blood will flow."[92] Benia's gangsters, not tsarist officialdom, are the ones infused with "blue blood." Memoirists likewise portray Mishka Iaponchik, the real-life gangster who supposedly served as Benia Krik's prototype, as the king of Odessa. Teffi describes how General Grishin-Almazov, the city's military governor between 1918 and 1919, "entered negotiations with . . . the infamous Mishka Iaponchik. I am not sure if they reached any sort of agreement, but Grishin-Almazov was only able to drive his car at full speed through the city because he was promised that a bullet awaited him around the next corner [*pulia na povorote ulitsy*]."[93] The archetypal gangster king of Odessa appeared in various other guises and under different monikers in interwar Soviet literature: in Slavin's *Intervention* the city's underworld is in the clutches of Filipp, a self-professed "politically unaffiliated anarchist" (*svobodnyi-anarkhist*); in Kozachinskii's *Green Wagon,* a Jewish criminal named Sashka Shvarts is "one of the most dangerous bandits in the region," a thug who notoriously avows that "he who shoots best is he who shoots last."[94]

Soviet-era mythmakers further developed the image of Odessa's Jewish criminals first put forth by prerevolutionary writers like Aleksandr Kuprin, Faust, and

Semen Iushkevich, creating characters with charm, intellect, and an innate capacity to manipulate people and language. As the king of the underworld, Slavin's Filipp controls the flow of armaments in Odessa. But as an anarchist he claims sympathy with the Revolution, offering the Bolsheviks a discount on much needed weaponry.[95] He justifies his criminality philosophically by maintaining that he is an "inevitable evil of the capitalist system," and cites Proudhon, Bakunin, and Kropotkin as his intellectual forerunners.[96] Benia Krik similarly uses language to sustain his authority, and he resorts to violence only when it is absolutely necessary. In one instance he demonstrates his eloquence while delivering a eulogy at the funeral of an unintended victim of his gangsters in a botched robbery. In the tradition of the grandiloquent Odessit, Benia imbues this quotidian tragedy with lofty significance, maintaining that the unfortunate Josif Muginshtein "died for the whole working class."[97] As a modern-day Robin Hood, Benia "stamps out lies in his quest for justice" and ostentatiously provides for those in need.[98] As a leader of Odessa's Jewish community, he promises Muginshtein's mother a comfortable life and a first-rate funeral for her son:

> Listen to me with your ears, Aunt Pesya! You're getting five thousand in hand and fifty rubles a month till you die—may you live to be a hundred and twenty! Josif's funeral will be first-class. Six horses, like lions, two hearses with garlands, chanters from the Brodsky Synagogue, and Minkovsky himself will come to chant the burial service for your departed son![99]

Benia may have achieved power through extortion and robbery, but his leadership is perpetuated by his rhetorical skills and his self-fashioned (and not always believable) moral code.

As Soviet authors who wrote within the context of a Marxist state, Babel and Slavin imbued their gangsters with a command of revolutionary language, an instrument they manipulate to achieve their criminally ignoble ends. Vladimir Jabotinsky took a similar approach with his Jewish lowlifes, but since he operated within a Zionist framework, his characters invoke Jewish self-defense more often than class consciousness to claim legitimacy and their necessary presence among upstanding community members. In *The Five,* Jabotinsky's narrator questions the credentials of a tough Jew who volunteers to help thwart a seemingly imminent pogrom:

> "Who's that character?" I asked Serezha after he'd left with a package. "Don't get angry—but by any chance does he smuggle young girls to Buenos Aires?"
>
> "You, *caballero,* are a lout and an ignoramus: those fellows wear bowler hats, not peaked caps. You'd be better off asking the fire chief

> Miroshnichenko about the fire in the Stavrid house on Slobodka: who rescued Hanna Barashevan and her baby? Motya. The firemen chickened out, but Motya and his gang ran up to the third floor and carried them out!"
>
> "What did they carry out?"
>
> "What do you mean 'what'? Hanna and her infant. Isn't that enough?"
>
> "Anything else? Not in their arms, but in their pockets?"
>
> He burst into broad laughter.
>
> "I don't deny you pose the question correctly. But what kind of people do you need now: honest contenders for lowly elected positions—or cutthroats with five fingers on each fist?"[100]

Crime and strength intersected in old Odessa; a swindler could redefine himself as a "good Jew" by directing robbery and violence against Gentiles, and an underworld kingpin could cite Proudhon and offer class-based discounts in order to inscribe himself into the narrative of the Revolution.

But old Odessa was not a Judeo-kleptocracy simply because its gangsters happened to be of Jewish descent. Soviet-era mythmakers connected Judaic practices with criminality in their depictions of the city and its people, thus making Odessa into a "shtetl" of sin. Recalling his arrest for revolutionary activity in 1902, Jabotinsky describes the intersection of the sacred and the illicit, the co-optation of the Hebraic by the criminal, in Odessa's prison. Jabotinsky fondly remembers his experience in jail among Odessa's thieves as "one of the most pleasant and dearest of my memories" because of their kindness and generosity.[101] The prisoners constructed an elaborate "telephone" to exchange books and other objects between cells, which they whimsically called *lechah dodi,* also the name of a Friday evening prayer traditionally sung to welcome the Sabbath. For Jabotinsky, *lechah dodi* is a testament to "the Jewish influence on this unique people and on their lingua franca," a Hebrew-inflected thieves' cant.[102]

The intersection of Judaism and Jewish discourse with criminality reaches its apogee (and greatest irony) in Babel's *Odessa Stories.* In one instance, Benia's thugs use a mock Jewish funeral procession as a cover to ambush their rivals from a different neighborhood. In the film *Benia Krik* the gangsters are bribed with money hidden inside precious and beautifully embroidered Torah scrolls. In a parody of a sacred synagogue ritual, Benia's accomplice Froim Grach takes the Torah and, as he slowly unwinds its parchment containing the hallowed words of God, tsarist rubles come tumbling out.[103] In "Liubka the Cossack," one shady character views his forced detention in a brothel in biblical terms, insisting that "I still have some faith in God who will lead me out of here, the way He led all the Jews first out of

Egypt and then out of the desert!"[104] Illicit sex and Judaism converge in Liubka's brothel, where the procuress reads *The Miracles and Heart of the Baal-Shem* [*Tov*] to Liubka's infant son, suggesting that Hasidic piety is not the antithesis of sinful transgression.[105] Whereas in the shtetls of the northern Pale the victimized Jews invoke their history and faith in God to rationalize their passivity, in Odessa Judaic narration is a source of criminal empowerment, a place where Benia the King commits his robberies while telling "stories from the life of the Jewish people."[106] Odessa's gangsters spoke Jewish, exuded Jewishness, and manipulated Judaism to achieve and sustain their ascendancy.

Prerevolutionary mythmakers had used Yiddish inflections, Jewish expressions, and Hebraic words in their Russian texts to give the Odessa myth its Jewish flavor, a tradition that Babel continued in his *Odessa Stories* but with greater subtlety and refinement than did his predecessors.[107] On rare occasions Babel uses Russianized Jewish words in his texts, such as *trefnoi,* derived from the Hebrew word *tref,* which means nonkosher food.[108] Some of his characters speak grammatically incorrect Russian, marking them as ethnic minorities.[109] But Jewishness emerges in *Odessa Stories* through narrative style rather than vocabulary. These stories are told with a Talmudic rhythm, unfolding through repetition, effusive questions and answers, and circular dialogue, as in the following instances:

> And the gangsters called a council together to decide about Benia Krik. I wasn't at the council, but the word has it that they did call together a council.[110]

> Grach listened to him patiently, but then interrupted him, because he was a simple man with no tricks up his sleeve. "I'm a simple man with no tricks up my sleeve," Froim said.[111]

> They said they would be back in about a half an hour. And they were back in half an hour.[112]

> "Where do the police begin and Benia end?" he wailed. "The police end where Benia begins."[113]

Although it is mentioned on several occasions that "Benia talks little," he actually speaks in a stereotypically Jewish manner, replete with verbosity and an endless stream of questions, somewhat reminiscent of Sholem Aleichem's garrulous characters.[114] On one occasion Benia uses a traditional Jewish expression, "may she live to be a hundred and twenty," which Yiddish speakers typically insert into dialogue when wishing others good health.[115] Babel's Russian-speaking Jews can kvetch as well as their cousins in the shtetl, who, like Menakhem-Mendl's wife, Sheyne-Sheyndl, practice it to justify their behavior by making others feel guilty.

Despite his immense wealth, Rubin Tartakovskii rejects Benia's extortion letter by citing the alleged suffering he perpetually endures. He writes to Benia that he is

> sick and tired of having to eat such a bitter crust of bread and witness such trouble after having worked all my life like the lowliest carter. And what do I have to show for my life sentence of hard labor? Ulcers, sores, worries, and no sleep![116]

Babel's gangsters often have family names derived from Yiddish words. "Froim Grach" may be translated as "Froim the Hothead"; Liubka the prostitute is ironically named "Shneiveis," meaning "Snow White"; Josif Muginshtein's name derives from *mogin,* which is Yiddish for "stomach"—an allusion to his subsequent murder during a robbery.

Babel and Jabotinsky both use Yiddishisms and references to Judaic practices to give their stories an ironic humor, sacralizing the profane and criminalizing the exalted. But the comical junction of Jewishness and criminality comes out in other ways as well. In Jabotinsky's *The Five* a typically Jewish turn-of-the-century family squabble intersects with robbery in a witty manner reminiscent of the stories and anecdotes published in *Odesskaia pochta* and *Krokodil* in the 1910s. Two affluent brothers are fiercely divided on the issue of assimilation, with one brother striving to efface all vestiges of Jewishness from his speech and behavior in favor of Russification, changing his name from Beiresh Moiseevich to Boris Mavrikevich. His older brother Abram mocks him for his Russian affectations, annoying "him in every way imaginable" and calling him a "shmendrik" behind his back.[117] Assimilation was, of course, an issue that divided Russian Jews in the early twentieth century, and Odessa was merely one of many burgeoning urban centers where the drama of modernization and cultural change unfolded. But this family feud unfolded in a uniquely Odessan manner, when bandits showed up at Abram Moiseevich's door, demanding money in the name of the Revolution:

> An "ex" [expropriation] had taken place yesterday at Abram Moiseevich's. Two young men showed up, one belonging to the common people, the other, better "educated"; they brandished a document with a stamp as well as two "pistols with large cylinders," and demanded five thousand rubles—if not Abram Moiseevich would die. . . .
>
> He thought for a bit, suddenly burst out laughing, and then said to them:
>
> "Listen, you young men: how'd you like to get fifteen thousand rubles instead of five? Go to my brother Beiresh, show him your guns, and get ten from him. Then come back to me: if you show me his ten, I'll turn over my five to you then." . . .

> So the member of the common people remained behind with Abram Moiseevich for two hours, they smoked cigars and gradually got to chatting amicably. He said that he wasn't really a swindler but a decent fellow and a good Jew; he'd participated in the self-defense of 1905, had even contributed an entire militia unit, and then, after the manifesto, had worked diligently during the month of October. . . . The more educated one returned after two hours and displayed the ten thousand rubles; Abram Moiseevich opened his safe immediately and calmly extracted a packet of bills, counted out five thousand right in front of them, thought a bit, and added another thousand; then he put the rest of his money away. . . .
>
> "Good-bye and good luck," he said to them. "You'll end up in Siberia, but you've made me happy."[118]

Just as Odessa's gangsters manipulated revolutionary ideology and Judaic practices to achieve wealth and power, prosperous Jews exploited the city's criminality to settle personal grudges and familial disputes, adding another layer to the humor that defined the multifaceted Odessa myth.

Odessa's Jewish criminals sought out the festive merriment for which the city of sin was notorious, partaking in the music, drinking, and dancing in often unexpected ways. After a laborious day of underworld activity, Lev Slavin's Filipp would unwind in a tavern, listening to the local talent performing typical Odessan criminal folksongs about bandits, murder, and revenge. On one occasion Filipp was unhappy with their performance; he rose up in anger and loudly interrupted them, maintaining that "music is relaxation . . . especially when one works the entire day. . . . Our work is difficult work. . . . I am thus displeased when people sing badly. . . . Listen—do you really think bandits sing like this?" As the crowd got into a panic over Filipp's outburst, envisioning an unpleasant outcome, Filipp continued his invective, pointing out that "this is how the choir in the synagogue sings." But this is old Odessa, where looming violence often gives way to added entertainment; the master of ceremonies offered Filipp the microphone, suggesting that "if the citizen knows the customs [*byt*] of bandits so well, perhaps he would like to sing us a song about bandits?" Filipp accordingly took up the challenge; he performed with gusto, demonstrating that to be the king of Odessa, one must entertain as proficiently as one commits robbery.[119]

Old Odessa's bandits sing better than synagogue choristers, and they also throw more elaborate and decadent wedding receptions than traditional Jews. Semen Iushkevich had first unveiled the Odessan Jewish wedding in *Leon Drei,* and Soviet-era mythmakers further developed this theme, portraying the Odessan wedding as a confluence of crime, Judaic ritual, dissipation, and, in some cases, political conflict.

The chaotic Jewish wedding often appears in Odessan street songs produced in the 1920s. Perhaps the most famous is "Shneerson's Wedding" ("Svad'ba Shneersona"), composed by the Odessit Miron Iampolskii in 1920 and recorded much later by Arkadii Severnyi.[120] The song begins in an infernal state of anarchy:

Uzhasno shumno v dome Shneersona
Se tit zikh khoishekh—priamo dym idet!

There is an awful racket in Shneerson's house
Everything's running wild—all hell has broken loose![121]

A cacophony of music plays, emanating from three different gramophones. The guests "all dance around in wild ecstasy [*v ugare dikom*], shaking the house's foundations."[122] The party, however, is nearly shut down by the newly installed Soviet officials, who unexpectedly show up and berate the happy couple for not receiving "official permission" for the marriage, threatening to annul it the following day. But the groom saves the day by punching the official in the teeth; joy is restored and everybody resumes their dancing.

Though written in Russian, "Shneerson's Wedding" is abounding in Yiddishisms, such as *se tit zikh khoishekh,* which means "all hell has broken loose" and *shpilit,* which is used instead of the Russian *igraet* for "playing." The song's characters often have partially or entirely Yiddish names, including "Abrasha der Molochnik" ("Abe the Milkman") and, most comically, "Khaim Kachkes," which may be translated as "Khaim the Duck." With its interspersed Yiddish phrases and inflections, "Shneerson's Wedding" captures the Jewishness of Odessa, and with its pandemonium, profusion of food, and violent overtones, the song captures the Odessanness of its Jews.[123]

But the most infamous Odessan Jewish wedding in Soviet literature and film is the wedding of Benia Krik's immense and unattractive sister, Dvoira, a lavish affair, where "turkeys, roasted chicken, geese, gefilte fish, and fish soup in which lakes of lemon shimmered like mother-of-pearl" are served.[124] Liquor flows profusely, with incessant toasting "to life" (*lechaim!*), and, in the film *Benia Krik,* the intoxicated and gluttonous guests are shown storming the dance floor. They may be dancing the traditional Jewish horah—arm in arm, rapidly swirling in circles—but the revelers are anything but traditional Jews; Benia's gangsters lead the way, and Liubka's prostitutes entertain the guests, while a one-man band furiously pounds away on his drums and blares his trumpet. Trouble ensues, however, when the police chief shows up at the wedding in advance of a massive raid planned against the gangsters, with the former assuming that a drunk and distracted underworld could be nabbed in one fell swoop. But the joke is on them. Benia's men are aware of the impending assault and launch a preemptive strike against tsarist officialdom,

burning the police station to the ground. The wedding thus concludes with the Jewish criminals ending up on top; it was a euphoric celebration for all, except for the police, and perhaps the groom, an unfortunate-looking little Jewish man who is last seen being smothered and devoured by his enormous bride.

Benia Krik's wedding is emblematic of old Odessa. It is a realm of empowerment where weak shtetl Jews are magically transformed into gigantic and fierce gangsters who control their own destiny and tower above the Gentile authorities. It is a realm where traditional Judaic practices, Jewish speech, and Jewish mannerisms are ironically manipulated for criminal ends. And it is a realm where merriment prevails in every situation, regardless of the danger and violence, lacking the solemnity one would expect in a time of rampant criminality, revolutionary upheaval, and anti-Semitism.

The Sovietization of the Schnorrer

The exodus of Odessa's writers in the 1920s ushered in a new era for the myth of old Odessa, as mythmakers now had a larger, national audience to consume their tales of Russia's Eldorado. But the establishment of Soviet rule also meant a new epoch for the imagined Odessit, who, like his literary architects, left the city of sin. A new geographical and temporal dimension was introduced to the Odessa myth: whereas Benia Krik, Mishka Iaponchik, and Filipp the Anarchist remained firmly entrenched in their pre-Soviet kingdom of Odessa, the NEP-era Odessit became a nomad, seeking out other venues to practice his roguery and indulge his thirst for sensuous pleasure. Il'ia Il'f and Evgenii Petrov undertook the Sovietization of the Odessit in their novels *The Twelve Chairs* and *The Golden Calf,* through the persona of Ostap Bender, who, despite his repeated claim of Turkish descent, likely spent his formative years in the Moldavanka, keeping company with Leon Drei, Benia Krik, and other Jewish charlatans.[125]

In both novels Ostap Bender uses his vivid imagination, charm, and intellect to concoct elaborate schemes to acquire untold wealth and to end his impoverished existence as a wanderer in a rapidly changing Soviet Union.[126] In *The Twelve Chairs,* he gets involved with a former Marshall of the Nobility, Ippolit (Kisa) Matveevich Vorobianinov, who recently learned that his mother-in-law hid their family jewels inside a chair from their dining room set, before fleeing the Bolshevik takeover of their town. In *The Golden Calf,* Bender allies himself with three dim-witted companions to hunt down and extort money from an alleged millionaire named Aleksandr Koreiko. The USSR rather than old Odessa serves as the landscape of knavery and humor in both novels, and, despite the ultimate failure of Bender's missions, he repeatedly exhibits along the way all the qualities that mark him as an Odessit who was reared and educated in the infamous Judeo-kleptocracy known as old Odessa.

Ostap Bender never professes to be from Odessa, but his appearance, demeanor, and fraudulent strategies firmly root him in the city's traditions. When first introduced to the reader, Bender is described as dashing and robust; he contemplates becoming a polygamist, "since his virility and good looks were absolutely irresistible to the provincial belles looking for husbands."[127] Like his forerunner, Leon Drei, Bender views marriage as a device for enrichment, and, in one instance, he seduces and weds a widow merely to steal one of Vorobianinov's former chairs, which she had earlier acquired. Bender rarely resorts to violence, and, like Benia Krik, he uses carefully crafted and articulate extortion letters to rob his intended victim. He is intimately familiar with the Odessan underworld: he avows his superiority to the legendary nineteenth-century Jewish criminal Son'ka Zolotaia Ruchka, and at one point he contends that "all contraband is made in Little Arnaut Street in Odessa."[128] He occasionally uses thieves' cant of Hebraic origin such as *khipes,* which was commonly used in Odessa's prerevolutionary underworld.[129] Much like Leon Drei and Benia Krik, Bender is described as a wild animal, seen pacing "up and down like a leopard [*bars*]," whose "long and noble nose" ably catches "the scent of roast meat [*zapakh zharenogo*]" when a potential target enters the room.[130] Like Benia Krik, Bender wears vibrantly colored clothing, including a similar pair of "raspberry-colored shoes."[131] His radiant attire is both a reflection and a source of his strength. "No chair can withstand these shoes," Bender insists, and, upon declaring his intention to marry the widow Gritsatsueva, he polishes "his crimson shoes with the sleeve of his jacket."[132] Quite literally, Ostap Bender follows in the footsteps of Benia Krik, the gangster king of Odessa.

Bender is a master dissimulator; he achieves control over others and compels them to do his bidding through psychological chicanery, linguistic manipulation, and the assumption of false identities. Despite Vorobianinov's distrust of Bender, he is powerless to refuse Bender's demands, "losing his own personality and rapidly being absorbed by the powerful intellect of the son of a Turkish citizen."[133] When cajoling Koreiko to hand over his money, Bender speaks "in the atrocious manner of a prerevolutionary attorney-at-law [*v skvernoi manere dorevoliutsionnogo prisiazhnogo poverennogo*], who, catching hold of a little word, does not let it out of his teeth but drags it after him through the ten days of a great trial."[134] Bender shrewdly destroys others by taking their weaknesses and hyperbolically inflating them; he repeatedly calls Vorobianinov the "gentleman from Paris" (*gospodin iz Parizha*), even though Vorobianinov has never left Russia.[135] But as a former nobleman Vorobianinov is, by definition, an alien in the Soviet proletarian state, and calling him an émigré is both a plausible charge and tantamount to branding him a traitor. Bender relishes impersonating others, particularly Soviet officials. As a fire inspector who (absurdly) cites articles from the criminal code he is able to search an old people's home for one of the missing chairs; as a grandmaster chess player (who

has never played chess in his life) he is able to dupe an entire provincial town into financing his escapades; and as an artist (who can neither draw nor paint) he joins a theater troop and wins free passage aboard their ship. Bender is usually unmasked as a fraud but not before he flees the scene of his scam, confident of his enduring success as a Soviet charlatan.

Bender's charlatanism implicitly marks him as an Odessit, with all the attendant attributes and cultural baggage characteristic of a swindler from Russia's city of sin, including his indelible Jewishness. Although he is never described as Jewish, never claims to be Jewish, and shows no particular affinity for the handful of patently Jewish characters who appear in the novels, Jewishness is embedded in Bender's very language—in the way he minces words, morally justifies his activities, and bombastically portrays himself as a misunderstood genius suffering at the hands of others. Despite the near total absence of Yiddishisms and Judaism in Bender's speech and behavior, the shtetl origins of the archetypal Odessit subtly emanate through Bender's demeanor.

Ostap Bender is the Soviet version of the schnorrer, the classic Jewish mooch who uses erudition, guilt, and fundamentally flawed logic to manipulate others into supporting him. But whereas the traditional Jewish schnorrer employs Judaic law as his instrument of deception, Bender uses a secularized (and Sovietized) variation. He regularly professes his entitlement to a share of Vorobianinov's jewels by proclaiming his indispensability and his perpetual toil. "You see how I suffer, Kisa," Bender kvetches, "and what risks I run for your chairs."[136] Vorobianinov's repeated objections to Bender's demands are countered by the latter's self-aggrandizement and his devaluation of the former's own abilities. Bender berates Vorobianinov for allegedly "living off me for the last three months. For three months I've been providing you with food and drink and educating you."[137] On many occasions Bender preaches his own morality to refute his villainy; "I respect the criminal code . . . [and] this is my weakness."[138] Like the schnorrer, who professes his integrity through Talmudic logic, Bender cites his principles and his idealism, juxtaposing them to the alleged crookedness of those around him. "I, for example, am fed by ideas. I don't stretch my paw for the sour rubles of some Executive Committee. My aim is higher. As for you," he chastises one of his collaborators in *The Golden Calf,* "I see that you are in love with money for its own sake."[139] Bender has mastered the art of the sanctimonious guilt trip, which he demonstrates in his first encounter with Vorobianinov:

> "You're a rather nasty man," retorted Bender. "You're too fond of money."
>
> "And I suppose you aren't?" squeaked Ippolit Matveevich in a flutelike voice."
>
> "No, I'm not."

"Then why do you want sixty thousand?"
"On principle!"[140]

And through his avowed principles and unmatched aptitude for deception, "smooth operator" Ostap Bender inveigles a reluctant but powerless Vorobianinov into promising him 40 percent of his wealth, should they actually succeed in finding it.

In the tradition of Sholem Aleichem's characters, Ostap Bender perpetually exhibits his long-windedness. His ramblings are incessant, meandering without end and seemingly without a point, much like a Talmudic tractate or the well-known gossiping of the shtetl matchmaker. For instance, Bender subjects Vorobianinov, the "gentleman from Paris," to his tortuous tongue when first introducing himself:

> Carefully locking the door, Bender turned to Vorobianinov, who was still standing in the middle of the room, and said:
>
> "Take it easy, everything's all right! My name's Bender. You may have heard of me!"
>
> "No, I haven't," said Ippolit Matveevich nervously.
>
> "No, how could the name Ostap Bender be known in Paris? Is it warm there just now? It's a nice city. I have a married cousin there. She recently sent me a silk handkerchief by registered mail. . . . Which frontier did you cross? Was it the Polish, Finnish, or Romanian frontier? An expensive pleasure, I imagine. A friend of mine recently crossed the frontier. He lives in Slavuta, on our side, and his wife's parents live on the other. He had a row with his wife over a family matter; she comes from a temperamental family. She spat in his face and ran away to her parents across the frontier. The fellow sat around for a few days but found things weren't going well. There was no dinner and the room was dirty, so he decided to make it up with her. He waited till night and then crossed over to his mother-in-law. But the frontier guards nabbed him, trumped up a charge, and gave him six months. Later on he was expelled from the trade union. The wife, they say, has now gone back, the fool, and her husband is in the workhouse. She is able to take him things. . . . Did you come that way too?"[141]

But even meandering monologues serve a manipulative purpose, and, just as the proverbial marriage broker's verbosity helps bring about a mendacious business transaction, Vorobianinov was ultimately "driven to despair by the stories of Bender's friends, and seeing that he was not getting anywhere, gave in" to the smooth operator's relentless demands.[142]

Bender's ancestry thus traces back to the shtetl, but his schnorring, kvetching, and verbosity have been transformed by a period of incubation in old Odessa. The

traditional schnorrer's bombast, moral rectitude, and purported value to the Jewish community are ultimately absurd; he is a parasitical consumer of others' resources who contributes nothing in return, other than assuaging the guilty conscience of his benefactor, which he, the schnorrer, is responsible for having produced through his kvetching in the first place. But as an Odessit who is fortified by the magic radiating out of Russia's Eldorado, where Jews physically and psychologically reign supreme, Bender is actually a source of strength and an invaluable asset to his criminal collaborators. The jewels belong to Vorobianinov by right of inheritance, yet the former nobleman is utterly incapable of maneuvering through the Soviet system. Bender's claim to have fed and educated Vorobianinov may be egotistical (to put it mildly), but it is not far from the truth. Vorobianinov and his roguish counterparts in *The Golden Calf* need Ostap Bender because he is a veritable Odessan who knows how to use his good looks, his charm, and his Jewish wit to achieve his criminal ends. Andrei Siniavskii is only partly correct in writing that Ostap Bender is the most successful charlatan because "he is a Soviet man, wise to all the ways of—and ways out of—the new system."[143] Siniavskii confuses cause with effect: Bender is a "Soviet man" who can manipulate the system *because* he is an Odessan Jewish swindler nurtured on the bountiful bosom of "the Moldavanka, our generous mother, a life crowded with suckling babies, drying rags, and conjugal nights filled with big-city chic and soldierly tirelessness," as Isaac Babel had earlier put it.[144]

Yet there is an even greater irony in Bender's place as an Odessit cast adrift in the world of Soviet socialism. Despite his chutzpah and his histrionic pomposity, Bender occasionally reveals his alienation and a personal sense of worthlessness. He bemoans his fate as a schnorring swindler in a proletarian state:

> "How pleasant it would be," he remarked thoughtfully, "to work with a legal millionaire in a well-organized bourgeois state with ancient capitalist traditions! There a millionaire is a popular figure. His address is known to everybody. He lives in a private house somewhere in Rio de Janeiro. You go to him to keep an appointment, and in the hall itself, after the very first greetings, you take some money away from him. And all of this, bear in mind, is done in a kindly way, politely: 'Hello, sir. Excuse me. I'll have to trouble you a bit. All right. That's all.' And that *is* all!"[145]

There is little room for a roguish Odessan in Soviet society. "You know, Vorobianinov," Bender dramatically philosophizes when their luck seems to have run out,

> that chair reminds me of our life. We're also floating with the stream. People push us under and we come up again, although they aren't too pleased about it. No one likes us, except for the criminal investigation department, which doesn't like us either. Nobody has any time for us. If

> the chess enthusiasts had managed to drown us yesterday, the only thing left would have been the coroner's report.[146]

Bender's self-perception reflects that of the diaspora Jew, a paradoxical fusion of the sense of entitlement of a divinely chosen nation with the self-denigration of a hapless people abandoned to their suffering in an unjust world. The juxtaposition of entitlement and suffering is at the core of the Jewish exilic condition, and it is a cultural trope that is ironically reflected in modern Jewish humor through the practice of kvetching. Bender's Zion, however, is not the gilded city of Davidic Jerusalem, but it is an equally inaccessible city of gold, one that was slated for destruction in the name of a workers' revolution.

Dismantling Old Odessa

The Bolsheviks finally captured power in Odessa in February 1920, after a long and bitter struggle, which pitted them against Whites, Ukrainian nationalists, German and French interventionists, and the "revolutionary" bandit armies of Mishka Iaponchik and other gangsters. Exuding the confidence characteristic of triumphant rebels with a utopian vision, the Bolsheviks immediately declared their intent to liquidate Odessa's rampant criminality. Already on February 22, 1920, the Bolshevik newspaper *Odesskii kommunist* announced the nascent state's initial successes in its "merciless struggle against banditry," which included a massive raid in the Moldavanka and the arrest of approximately one hundred gangsters, who had been "terrorizing the population."[147] Victory was inevitable, the new regime contended, and they immodestly pointed to Moscow, the seat of their power, which was allegedly "the quietest and safest of the big European cities. During the day order prevails; at night not a single burst of gunfire can be heard, and even at the latest hour one can freely stroll along the remotest alleyways."[148]

There is hardly anything unique about a government that harnesses its resources to combat crime and violence, particularly after a period of war and the total collapse of state institutions. Furthermore, the battle against delinquency in Odessa was nothing new; prerevolutionary police, city officials, and journalists all recognized that Odessa was becoming an increasingly dangerous place to live. But the Bolshevik offensive on the city's criminality was fundamentally different from what had come before, for inasmuch as prerevolutionary officials sought to crush crime and debauchery, old Odessa was nevertheless humorously celebrated as a gilded city of sin. Nobody sought to stamp out criminal folksongs; nobody sought to eradicate *odesskii iazyk;* nobody questioned the depiction of Jewish gangsters with wit, charm, and a moral code. This all changed under Bolshevik rule, as their assault against old Odessa was ideologically driven. For many of the propagandists and activists within the new regime, the celebration of old Odessa's decadence,

music, revelry, and frivolous humor was fundamentally incompatible with the solemnity of constructing the world's first communist state.

Throughout the interwar years and the final decade of Stalin's rule, the condemnation of the Odessa myth crossed currents with the contentious issues of the day, further contributing to the myth's politicization and notoriety. At the dawn of the Soviet era "old Odessa" was often equated with the bourgeoisie, émigrés, and other counterrevolutionaries, all of whom were marked as criminally un-Soviet. During the 1920s the persistence of crime and unbridled merriment in Odessa was depicted as a symptom of the bankrupt and reactionary nature of NEP. During the late 1920s and the Cultural Revolution of the early Stalin era, the attack against klezmer-influenced criminal folksongs was a subset of the attack against jazz, which was branded as the music of perniciousness and unfettered sexuality. And in the late 1940s the myth's implicit Jewishness contributed to its suppression during Stalin's anti-cosmopolitan campaign. The principal motifs, images, and language of the myth largely remained constant during these decades; what changed was the way in which old Odessa was refracted through the dynamic ideology and evolving exigencies of the Soviet state.

During the 1920s Odessa's local press played an active role in condemning and deriding "old Odessa" as a relic of the prerevolutionary era, which was allegedly enjoying its last gasp before the envisioned final onslaught by the builders of socialism. Constrained capitalism meant the state's partial retreat from the economic realm, which in turn meant greater room for smugglers, swindlers, and hookers to ply their trades. Concomitantly the Soviet government's loose grip on cultural production and social organization meant relative freedom for those who propagated the Odessa myth and for those who "practiced" it in Odessa's saloons, markets, and brothels. There was unabashed revelry during NEP, and puritanical Communists hated it.[149] Anxiety over what Eric Naiman has called "ideological defloration"—a pervasive fear that "the relative wealth, comfort, and diversity of NEP threatened to seduce, fundamentally change, and thus destroy the Russian proletariat"—was omnipresent, and, accordingly, the Party incessantly disseminated a negative view of Nepmen and other suspected counterrevolutionaries.[150] Humor was also deployed in this battle against bourgeois decadence, with the Soviet journal *Krokodil* regularly ridiculing the corrupt and the profligate.[151] These enduring un-Soviet elements were a national stain on the Soviet landscape; they were not confined to any particular city or region of the USSR. But in Odessa itself the un-Soviet fused with the Odessit, and bourgeois decadence became synonymous with old Odessa.

In attacking the myth of old Odessa, however, the Odessan press ironically strengthened the myth's potency. Like prerevolutionary mythmakers, Odessa's Soviet detractors of the 1920s conflated myth with reality; authentic crime reports often appeared in the same periodical as "interviews" with villains, imaginative descriptions of seedy taverns, and humorous couplets comically reproaching

debauchery. *Odesskii kommunist* set the tenor in 1920, insisting that "the soul of the city still reflects the Leon Drei-ism of old Odessa," thereby entrenching a fictional Jewish swindler as the new regime's greatest local antagonist.[152] In 1926 another local newspaper conducted a "survey" (*anketa*) among "our hooligans," including the colorfully named Mishka Nos (Mike the Nose), Pet'ka Ogurtsov (Pete Cucumbers), and, most notably, Alesha Sha (Alex Shush), who bore the moniker of a well-known criminal folksong.[153] Criminal slang and *odesskii iazyk* figured prominently in feuilletons and in allegedly genuine reports on the wicked ways of the Moldavanka's brothels and thieves' dens, including words of Hebraic origin such as *marovikher* (pickpocket) and *iold* (victim or dupe).[154] In one instance *Vechernie izvestiia* even provided a miniature criminal slang dictionary, much as *Odesskaia pochta*'s Faust had done in the prerevolutionary era.[155] Old Odessa may have become ideologically abhorrent to many, but the archetypal detractor of old Odessa during the 1920s operated within the same discursive framework as those who celebrated the city.

Old Odessa's adversaries thus acknowledged the debauchery, chaotic music, and frivolous humor ascribed to the city by its proponents. One article published in the local journal *Shkval,* in September 1926, vividly portrayed the feverish ecstasy evoked by the very name "Odessa-Mama": "Ah, you're going to Odessa! Odessa-Mama! Hee-Hee, Hah-Hah! Go on, carouse, enjoy yourself. Did you hear how once at Café Robina Rabinovich met up with Kostia Kalamandi and told him how . . ."[156] Old Odessa was still about drinking in posh cafés, dancing the foxtrot, huckstering in the Moldavanka, and sharing Jewish jokes. But this riotous revelry was not occurring in Odessa itself. Rather, it was taking place in Paris, Berlin, Constantinople, and other centers of "White emigration," where the former Odessits congregated, celebrated, and impatiently yearned for their lost city of sin. But they were dreaming the dream of fools:

> There is no longer an Odessa-Mama in Odessa. Bourgeois Odessa-Mama, debauched and dissolute [*rasputnyi i besputnyi*] Odessa, where the Rabinoviches and the Kostias endlessly got together to speculate and exchange "Odessan anecdotes" [*odesskii anekdot*], this Odessa no longer exists.[157]

In these sardonic tales old Odessa was reduced to a handful of nomadic remnants who, having been chased out of the city, found their way into various émigré circles. The culture of old Odessa was linked with counterrevolution, and its practice was prohibited in the city that had spawned it.

Yet the battle against old Odessa was routinely depicted as a work in progress. One article from 1926 described the fate of Odessa's flea market, "where pickpockets [*marovikhery*], counterfeiters [*farmazonshchiki*], and loafers [*lapetutniki*]" had formerly roamed freely in the city.[158] "Today," however,

> such a market no longer exists. . . . It has died. It is thoroughly and firmly dead. But the people who had fed on it have not perished. . . . They continue to live—these unfortunate junk dealers [*star´evshchiki*], people who trade "in air," buying and selling the most unbelievable rubbish [*khlam*] . . . watches without faces, boots without heels, and towels with suspicious-looking dark spots on them.[159]

The traders no longer sold the brightly colored sumptuous delicacies characteristic of old Odessa, offering instead rotten fruit and bitter-tasting tomatoes. The hapless marketers endured these difficult times, singing the songs of former days, including one of Sashka the Fiddler's favorites: "Don't Cry Mar-r-r-r-usia; You Will Be Mine."[160] In another article, published in *Vechernie izvestiia,* the author condemned the thieves and waifs who inhabited the "sick and lice-ridden [*vshivaia*] streets" but continued to sing criminal folksongs such as "Gop so smykom."[161] Old Odessa was dying a slow death. The formerly gilded city was gradually being drained of its glitter; all that was left was the stale stench of sin and a community of vagrants who zealously clung to memories of their glorious past in Russia's Eldorado.

Old Odessa's detractors repeatedly stressed the link between criminality, bourgeois decadence, cafés, and uninhibited music. The city's cafés were branded as "schools" for traders, hookers, speculators, and drunks who engaged in "orgies" of excess. "Everything was a commodity: beauty, deformity [*urodstvo*], virtue, and vice." As tsarist Russia's chief incubator of debauchery, Odessa "exported its brokers and coquettes to every corner of the Orthodox Empire." Although the Revolution came and destroyed "the old order," these profligate cafés continued to exist, with their proprietors leading double lives. "By day they feed the city inexpensive meals, but at night, when the dusty chandeliers burn brightly," the sounds of "evil [*likhie*] foxtrots fill the air" and the *gesheftmakhers* (businessmen) dream of their former lives.[162] Music was seen as the crux of the problem, and *Shkval* unleashed a vicious attack against the wild klezmer music of old Odessa, with its "raging pianos" and its fiddlers "who saw away at their instruments," playing a "mishmash of medleys," coupling "sad Hasidic tunes" with more chaotic numbers. In such an environment "it is impossible to speak, to think, to read the newspaper while the violin stirs up a pogrom of ideas in your mind, scrambles your memory, and stifles your words."[163] The article's author called for a

> revolution against this philistinism [*meshchanstvo*]. Let's banish the foxtrot and all unhealthy music. Let's declare a mutiny [*bunt*] against the music that tortures the nerves and compels you to do only one thing—to drink vodka. Let's create a "community for the defense of music against fiddlers."[164]

Sashka, the emblematic Jewish Fiddler, was thus vilified—a remnant of Odessa-Mama but one that had gotten a new lease on life through the revival of brothels, clubs, and taverns during the dissipated years of NEP.

If Sashka's fiddle and Rabinovich's jokes served as the literary metaphor for old Odessa's Jewish decadence, then Leonid Utesov represented its earthly incarnation. Leaving Odessa for the capitals in 1921, Utesov brought the Odessa myth to the Soviet stage through his performances of comedic skits, criminal folksongs, and, by the end of the decade, Soviet jazz music, whose roots traced back to southern Ukraine as much as to America. One outraged critic, who published under the name A. Men'shoi, reviewed one of Utesov's shows in Leningrad in 1924, disparaging the entertainer for the vulgarity (*poshlost'*) of his Jewish humor and boorish music. "There is nothing more vulgar, nothing smuttier," Men'shoi contended, "than Jewish anecdotes and third-class barroom gypsy romances. And Utesov is a master of both these genres. He is a master of vulgarity and obscenity [*pokhabstvo*]." But despite Men'shoi's deadly serious tone, he ironically inscribed Utesov into the Odessa myth by explicitly comparing him to Leon Drei, the exemplary Odessit of the prerevolutionary era: "the young man is beautiful, and, knowing that he is beautiful, he is insolent, just like Leon Drei." "How many hours," Men'shoi wondered with more than a touch of irritation, "does this young man spend in front of the mirror every day? He is a male coquette [*koket*]." Men'shoi called for an end to Utesov's performances of "bawdy Jewish anecdotes" and criminal songs which were appropriate for a "drunken audience" and nobody else, certainly not the proletariat empowered by the Revolution.[165]

But Leonid Utesov went on to great fame in the Soviet Union, propagating and celebrating his Odessit origins through his concerts, his records, and, somewhat later, his memoirs. And it was, in fact, during the years of the Cultural Revolution, 1929–1932—when, ironically, opponents of the vulgar music of NEP enjoyed significant power over Soviet music—that Utesov recorded his greatest musical homage to Odessa-Mama, a collection of criminal folksongs, which included the notorious "From the Odessa Jail," "Gop so smykom," and "Bagels."[166] "From the Odessa Jail" and "Bagels" have an unmistakable klezmer influence, complete with howling violins and clarinets typical of the genre. The humorous recounting of a prison break in "From the Odessa Jail" led to accusations that Utesov romanticized banditry. Utesov defended himself, however, maintaining that "he had sought to capture the 'wail' of the bandit soul," perhaps reflected in the song's screeching fiddle, Utesov's yelping, and his final protracted bleating of the words, "Oy my-a mama, my-a mama."[167] Much to the consternation of the puritanical opponents of the Moldavanka's uninhibited music, the frenzied fiddling of Kuprin's Sashka found a new home on the Soviet stage, in the form of Leonid Utesov's Theater-Jazz Orchestra, which debuted in March 1929, at the height of the Cultural Revolution.[168]

But the critics did not remain silent, and *Shkval*'s envisioned "community for the defense against fiddlers" was in fact realized, in spirit if not exactly in name. They called themselves the Russian Association of Proletarian Musicians (RAPM) and they militantly promoted the "class struggle" in Soviet music, seeking the

liquidation of all traces of bourgeois decadence from NEP-era culture. RAPM started to organize in 1923, but the party did not officially endorse their program until 1928, and, in 1930, it subordinated all musicians and performers to party control.[169] Avowing that "music can be a weapon in the hands of the enemy," RAPM condemned in the name of the proletariat the "pornographic, stupefying" Nepman music, which was being "disseminated on records and on the radio."[170] Their attack was not specifically against old Odessa but against the evils of NEP musical culture, including gypsy romances, criminal folksongs, foxtrots, and jazz. And the most popular practitioner of these genres was Leonid Utesov, an Odessit by birth, demeanor, reputation, and performance.

By the early 1930s the noose was tightening around old Odessa. Every facet of Russia's city of sin was condemned through a Bolshevik lens. The criminality, debauchery, and humor of the Odessit was branded a legacy of capitalist exploitation and bourgeois philistinism. Yet just as those who celebrated old Odessa rarely distinguished between myth and reality, its detractors considered myth and reality to be inextricably (and perniciously) linked. Odessa-Mama, in all its manifestations and guises, had to come to an end; it was a revolutionary imperative.

And every successful advance in the physical and cultural proletarianization of Odessa was celebrated in the city's press with glee. In 1925 *Shkval* published a report on the transformation of the Moldavanka, declaring that Babel's Moldavanka of "riotous drunkenness" and "brazen gangsters" has been decimated; "Liubka the Cossack is no more; she is dead."[171] As recently as 1922, the journal contended, the city's most tempestuous (*buinyi*) district was replete with criminal dens (*maliny*) and moonshine was distilled "in every house." But now there were clubs for the workers who were rebuilding Odessa; they played dominoes and checkers, read periodicals, and discussed serious problems such as "the liquidation of unemployment."[172] Singing still echoed in the halls of the Moldavanka's clubs for students and workers, but they were now patriotic tunes about the Revolution, according to *Vechernie izvestiia:*

> I signed up for the Union
> And now I don't pay taxes
> I wear a workers' smock
> And I spit on the bourgeoisie
> Man'ka, just like me
> Also joined the Union[173]

"The Moldavanka of bygone years cannot be resurrected," the author contended, for its communal spirit [now] reflects that of the working class," not the "criminal dens and taverns" formerly celebrated in song.[174]

But there was room in this new society for the Odessan gangster, so long as he renounced his deviant ways, as did San'ka Chertopolokh (San'ka the Devil's Terror), a fictional bandit whose escapades were serialized in *Vechernie izvestiia* in 1923.[175] San'ka fell into police hands, and, after recounting his unhappy childhood and criminal life to the police, he was proletarianized through reeducation, learning all about socialism from a female worker in the jute factory:

> All that the worker described to San'ka was new to him. She told him about Karl Marx, the founder of communism, and how the leaders of the Russian Revolution overturned the existing order of the entire world. San'ka was especially taken with the worker's depiction of Comrade Lenin.[176]

Others like San'ka were reeducated through their participation in quintessential Soviet institutions such as Kol'ka Shirmach (Kol'ka the Pickpocket), a character in a well-known Odessan criminal folksong from the early 1930s, "Music Is Playing in the Moldavanka." Kol'ka embraced the Soviet system while (ironically) working in the administration of the notorious Belomorkanal concentration camp.[177] When the Odessa thieves sent the beautiful Masha to bring him back, he cheerfully told her "to send my regards to Odessa" and inform the thieves that Kol'ka "no longer steals," having accepted the great new life given to him at the Belomorkanal.[178] Kol'ka was subsequently murdered for breaking his oath of loyalty to the underworld, but San'ka survived, and his former gang of thieves was arrested before they had a chance to avenge his betrayal. The Revolution unleashed its fury on Odessa's gangsters but regeneration through Sovietization was deemed possible. Socialism was annihilating the city of sin, but its gangster aristocracy need not have been consumed in its flames.

The gilded city of sin was declared over. "Odessa-Mamasha, which lay by the sea," has been chased out of the cafés and "trampled" to death, in the words of Semen Kirsanov.[179] "The noisy patrons of Café Fankoni and Café Robina lie in their graves," avowed the Tur Brothers in 1924; the cemetery was now the quiet resting place of "old Odessa," buried under its blooming vegetation.[180] "Oh city of Richelieu and De-Ribas, forget yourself!" commanded the poet Vladimir Narbut, "You must die and rise up anew!"[181]

But the most prominent mythmakers of the interwar era—Isaac Babel, Leonid Utesov, Il'ia Il'f, Evgenii Petrov, and Lev Slavin—were hardly calling for the city of sin's revival—old Odessa was "old" for them because old Odessa was over; they were just claiming the *right* to humorously commemorate its legendary past in fiction and in song. Isaac Babel—whose *Odessa Stories* were situated in the tsarist era and thus, by definition, in a bygone age—explicitly "ended" old Odessa in his story "Froim Grach," written in 1934, but not published during his lifetime. After

the Bolsheviks had turned against the gangsters and killed Benia Krik along with many of his troops, Froim Grach approached the Cheka, hoping to reach some sort of compromise with the Soviet regime. Though unarmed, Grach was nevertheless shot by a Cheka agent, who insisted that the Revolution had no "use" for such a man. But a native-Odessan Chekist disagreed and became visibly distraught over Grach's execution, avowing to his colleague that "you're not an Odessan, you can't understand what the old man represented."[182] The Odessan Chekist then took it upon himself to disseminate the legend of Froim Grach and the world he had embodied:

> He pulled himself together and chased away his memories. Then, livening up, he continued telling the Chekists who had come from Moscow about the life of Froim Grach, about his ingenuity, his elusiveness, his contempt for his fellow men, all the amazing tales that were now a thing of the past.[183]

The Revolution destroyed Froim Grach, but he was mythologized by one of its officials, thereby suggesting that being Soviet was not incompatible with the act of mythmaking.

Similarly Leonid Utesov sought to Sovietize (and therefore legitimize) "From the Odessa Jail," by adding a temporal dimension to its lyrics, with the following supplementary verse:

> Odessa, Odessa,
> Davno eto bylo,
> Teper' zvuchat motivy uzh ne te:
> Banditskie maliny davno pozabyty
> i vytesnil kichmany—novyi byt.
>
> Odessa, Odessa,
> This was all so long ago,
> Now such tunes can no longer be heard:
> Its criminal dens are long forgotten
> And the new way of life has displaced its prisons.[184]

Utesov maintained that criminal folksongs could no longer be heard, even though he continued to sing them himself. He declared that old Odessa's criminality and its attendant revelry had vanished, and he shared this fact with the public by paradoxically using the very same language, humor, and music the Revolution had allegedly rendered superfluous.

The demise of old Odessa and the ambiguous fate of its myth figures prominently in Il'f and Petrov's second novel, *The Golden Calf,* which takes place in 1931,

after NEP has ended and its decadent culture ostensibly eliminated. Ostap Bender, the archetypal Soviet-era Odessit, travels to Russia's former Eldorado, where the millionaire Koreiko lives and hoards his money. Although the city by the Black Sea is named "Chernomorsk" (which literally means "Black Sea"), it is undoubtedly Odessa, or, perhaps more correctly, the remains of what was once old Odessa. Il'f and Petrov describe the handful of antiquated and decrepit old timers who lethargically linger on:

> These were strange, outlandish people for our epoch. Nearly all of them had on white pique waistcoats and straw hats. Some of them even wore dilapidated old panamas. . . . Here in front of Dining Room No. 68, the former site of the famous Café Florida, gathered the remnants of Chernomorsk's prewar businessmen: brokers who had been deprived of their offices, commission merchants who had withered away without commissions, grain agents, bookkeepers who had lost their minds, and similar riff-raff. At one time they had come here to close their deals. Now they were drawn to their sunny corner through habit and the necessity of wagging their old tongues.[185]

These tragically comic beings yearn for the return of an imagined golden age. And

> everything that happened in the world was regarded by the old men as a prelude to declaring Chernomorsk a free city. Some time ago—a hundred years ago—Chernomorsk had actually been a free city, and this had been so nice and profitable that the legend of *Porto-Franco* cast its golden sheen at the bright corner near the Café Florida until this day.[186]

The myth of Russia's Eldorado is alive but only in the minds of some cranks who are out of step with the march of history.

But not all these cranks are old and feeble, as Ostap Bender, the young and virile dreamer of unlimited affluence, also hungers for his city of gold. He is, however, realistic enough to know it does not exist—it could not exist—within the proletarian Soviet state. Bender's surrogate paradise is Rio de Janeiro—another southern seaport of abundance and sin—which captivates his imagination:

> Crackling palms and colored birds flitted through his mind. Ocean liners rubbed sides against the piers of Rio de Janeiro. Clever Brazilian merchants busied themselves with coffee dumping before everybody's eyes. And in the open cafés the local young bloods were whooping it up with liquor and the tango.[187]

Bender's Rio is a fantasy, an inaccessible place, much as gilded Chernomorsk is to the ancient survivors who congregate around their formerly posh habitat of splendid wheeling and dealing.

Old Odessa is no more, and Bender is an Odessit who has no home in the Soviet Union. The Revolution transformed him into a nomadic wanderer. He could not live the hedonistic life he envisioned, even after acquiring Koreiko's millions. He is forced to spend

> fifteen nights in various trains going from one city to another, because nowhere could he find a room. In one place a blast furnace was being erected, in another an ice plant, in a third a zinc factory. Everything was filled with people of affairs. In the fourth place a Pioneers' camp meeting frustrated his plans, and in the room where the millionaire could have passed a pleasant evening with a woman companion, children were playing.

Toward the end of *The Golden Calf,* Bender recounts his own "version" of the fable of the Wandering Jew, in which the mythical Jewish blasphemer was condemned to roam the earth for thousands of years until he ultimately found himself smuggling goods from Romania into Russia during the civil war.[188] With nowhere to spend his extorted riches in the socialist state, Bender attempts to retrace the Wandering Jew's route in reverse by illegally crossing the Dniester River into Romania, destined for Rio de Janeiro. But he could not reach his imagined paradise; the Romanian border guards strip him of his wealth and force him back to the USSR, where he probably spends the rest of his life as a social alien without a clearly defined place in Soviet society, needing "to qualify as a janitor," as Bender himself puts it.[189]

The gilded city of sin, whether Rio de Janeiro or old Odessa, was Ostap Bender's golden calf. And old Odessa had much in common with the idol fashioned by the biblical Israelites at the base of Mount Sinai. It was a glitzy and alluring temptation, a lush desert oasis surrounded by delirious merrymakers. But it was also a deadly transgression, slated for annihilation by the forces of law and order. Old Odessa was, in many respects, a false deity of gold, and its worship had no place in the ideal Sovietized society and proletarianized culture.

Stalinist Hegemony

By the mid-1930s mythmaking had declined dramatically. Babel was published with decreasing frequency; Il'f and Petrov wrote no more Ostap Bender novels, and both authors died tragically, in 1937 and 1942, respectively; Leonid Utesov became the most popular entertainer in the Soviet Union, but his recordings no longer included the frivolous criminal folksongs of his earlier days.[190] Even old Odessa's antagonists who had riled against the city of sin in the local Odessan press during the 1920s completely vanished. *Odesskie izvestiia* and *Shkval* ceased publication toward the end of the decade, and the periodicals that succeeded them seemed to have more pertinent matters to discuss, such as the Five-Year Plans, the heightening international tensions, and the leading role of Joseph Stalin as father and protec-

tor of Soviet nations. Old Odessa retreated from the published realm, becoming a more private affair, with people exchanging anecdotes and crooning criminal folksongs.[191] Vestiges of Odessa-Mama sporadically appeared in literature and in film, but the unique concoction of humor, merriment, and criminality packaged in an idiom of Jewishness was barely discernable.

It would be reductionist to claim that Soviet culture during the pre–World War II Stalin era (1928–1941) was stagnant and homogeneous. Historians have demonstrated that state-sponsored culture did change—sometimes radically, as in 1932, for instance, when the Cultural Revolution abruptly ended—and the boundaries of tolerance for popular culture expanded and contracted as well.[192] But until the end of World War II the place of the Odessa myth in Soviet culture did not change significantly, particularly after 1933, when Lev Slavin's humorous play *Intervention* was first published. Richard Stites has argued that "the officially sponsored cultural system [of the Stalin era] encouraged people to have 'fun' within the context of order, morality, and labor, without succumbing to frivolity and vice."[193] Old Odessa was all about frivolity and vice, and, furthermore, the tendency to ascribe a code of morality to frivolous vice-ridden Jewish gangsters made the city of sin all the more reprehensible.

Old Odessa's emblem, the ironic Jewish criminal, was thus a casualty of Stalinism, but his silencing in the 1930s was *not* rooted in an attack against Jewish culture. Jewish schools remained open, Yiddish books were still published, and cultural institutions continued to function, including the Moscow Yiddish Theater, which even performed plays about ancient Jewish heroes, such as Alexander Goldfadn's *Bar Kokhbah*.[194] Leonid Utesov continued to sing and record songs about Jews, including "Ten Daughters" (recorded between 1937 and 1940) and "Uncle Elia" (recorded between 1939 and 1942).[195] In the tradition of Sholem Aleichem's Tevye the Dairyman stories, "Ten Daughters" celebrates the life of a Jewish man, who, despite his troubles, finds joy in his large family. His daughters, who have traditional-sounding Jewish names, including Sara, Rivochka, Elka, and Shprintsa, are married off one by one and settle throughout the Soviet Union. The music has a klezmer feel to it, and, in keeping with the cultural convention of making the Jewish wedding the climactic moment, the melancholic music becomes increasingly frenetic as his daughters are married. Utesov's intonation sounds almost Yiddish at various points, with striking similarities (before the fact) to Tevye's rendition of "If I Were a Rich Man" in *Fiddler on the Roof*. A Yiddish-inflected Jewish culture could thrive (and in many respects did thrive) during the Stalinist 1930s, but *not* in conjunction with a giddy and wicked Odessa-Mama.

The fundamental problem with the Odessa myth was the amalgamation of Jewishness, humor, and criminality, not with each of these elements in and of itself. The occasional gangster with a Jewish-sounding name who appeared between 1934 and World War II, such as Sashka Shvarts from Aleksandr Kozachinskii's 1938 novel

The Green Wagon, is devoid of the comical Jewishness that gave the Odessit his unique flavor. Shvarts is dangerous and deadly; he contends that one must quickly and efficiently shoot to kill, and "never leave any witnesses." One should never "shoot in the air."[196] Shvarts possesses a humorless methodical violence that is absent in Benia Krik's gangsters, who shoot "in the air because if you don't shoot in the air you might kill someone."[197] In contrast to Shvarts, the archetypal Odessan Jewish bandit is not passionately vicious, and he values human life. The Odessit is supposed to commit his sins while entertaining both his victims and his audience, using the witty motifs originally brought to the Odessa myth by Osip Rabinovich, Sholem Aleichem, and Semen Iushkevich. These writers had defined gilded wicked Odessa as a Jewish city of sin and laughter, a cultural edifice that began to crumble through the neglect of the Stalin era.

Old Odessa was cleaned up and redefined to fit the "order, morality, and labor" of the Stalin era, as was the Odessit himself. Perhaps the best-known fictional Odessit produced during this period is Arkadii Dziubin, a brave, nimble, but miniscule war hero, who appeared in 1941 in Lev Slavin's short novel *Two Soldiers* (*Dva boitsa*), and was venerated two years later in Soviet cinema, played by the Jewish actor Mark Bernes. Dziubin—whose family name is a tribute to Eduard Bagritskii, née Dziubin—hardly has the appearance of a swashbuckling Odessit, as he is "lanky" and "emaciated," with a "pale face" and "small eyes."[198] But he makes up for his puny stature with his agility, reflected in the "dexterous" movements of his "serpentine body," as well as his relentless fervor in fighting the Nazi invaders.[199] Although Dziubin is stationed on the Leningrad front, it is clear that his thoughts are far away on the Black Sea and that his contempt for the Fascist enemy is rooted in the Axis powers' invasion of his native land, Odessa. Upon receiving word of the assault on his city, he howls to fellow troops, practically in tears:

> Have you heard, a bomb has fallen right in the center of Deribasovskaia Street! One of the most magnificent streets in the Soviet Union, our Deribabushka [our Grandma Deribasovskaia]! Ai-ai-ai! Listen, they have smashed Pushkin's monument on Fel'dman Boulevard. It's a nightmare to think about what these Fascist scoundrels [*zhaby*] may be doing now![200]

Throwing himself into battle with his machine gun blazing, Arkadii declares that "this is for Deribabushka, you bastards!"[201] Dziubin worships his Odessa, but he expresses it by loyally defending the embattled Soviet state.

Arkadii Dziubin is a pale shadow of the mythologized Odessan Jew, but he exhibits certain vestigial traits that squarely mark him as a watered-down Odessit, appropriate for the Stalin era. Dziubin speaks with traces of old Odessa's thievish argot. Slavin describes his "softened sibilants and guttural sounds, the complete contempt for hard consonants before 'y,' that chic 'gangster' drawl [*shikarnyi*

'apashskii' pronons]—only in Odessa do they speak this way."[202] Like his Odessan predecessors, Dziubin is a master of words, always in control of the conversation, capable of charming fellow soldiers and women with his humorous stories. He is also musical, playing the mandolin and the piano for others, paying homage to Odessa's sailors, fishermen, and flowers.[203] But he sings no songs about suave Jewish thieves and tells no anecdotes about Rabinovich loafing in Café Fankoni, and, despite his "chic 'gangster' drawl," he is no criminal. As a lush land of abundance, Russia's Eldorado empowers the resilient Jewish Odessit, but he uses his strength to liberate his Soviet motherland, not to acquire wealth and run wild in the dissipated Moldavanka.

Just as the emblematic Odessit could no longer combine Jewishness, criminality, and humor, the dissolute revelry of old Odessa was removed from images of the city. The city aged and lost its wickedness; Odessa-Mama, protector of thieves and hookers, was now Deribabushka, grandmother to Soviet heroes. Leonid Utesov continued to praise the Odessa of his childhood through his songs, but he lauded neither its dashing criminals nor the rumbling of feverish music. One of his most popular songs from the late 1940s, "On the Black Sea" ("U Chernogo moria"), describes Odessa as paradise, a city "I see in my dreams," with fresh air, beautiful acacias, an inviting sea for bathing, and glowing steamships in its harbor.

> Life is always beautiful there
> For the old and for the young
> Every spring I am drawn to you
> To Odessa—my sunny city
> On the Black Sea[204]

Odessa was still heaven on earth, but the joy it engendered had nothing to do with Benia Krik's gangster syndicate, the bawdy nights in Liubka's brothel, or the screeching of Sashka's fiddle in subterranean taverns.

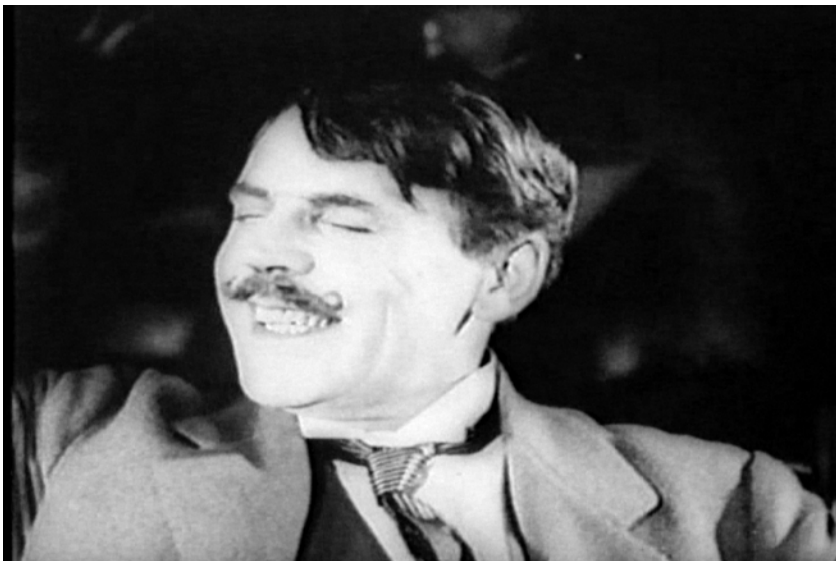
The fragmentation of the Odessa myth into its constituent parts hindered its production and dissemination during the Stalin era, but the final blow did not come until the Soviet dictator's last five years, 1948–1953, when the anti-cosmopolitan campaign devastated Soviet Jewish culture.[205] The Moscow Yiddish Theater was shut down, leading Soviet Yiddish writers were executed, and Jewish doctors were accused of attempting to murder Stalin himself. Con men with Jewish family names were routinely "unmasked" on the pages of Soviet newspapers.[206] Even Ostap Bender, whose indefatigable wit, charm, and deceptions had made him a hero to many, was now attacked; a publication ban on both Il'f and Petrov novels was put into effect and was only rescinded in 1956.[207] Jewish criminality was omnipresent in the official rhetoric of these years, but it was a grave and treasonous

criminality, which allegedly aimed at annihilating the Soviet Union. The destruction of Jewish culture and the refashioning of the Soviet Jew as an enemy of the state during the late Stalin era did significant damage to the facetiously wicked Odessa myth. Old Odessa was the antithesis of what Stalinist culture had become, and the myth was accordingly silenced. But silence need not imply extinction, and the Odessa myth merely lay dormant during these years. Forcing the myth deep underground ironically increased its potency, as Soviet discourse branded Odessa-Mama sinful and deviant, even though it was the deviance of the city of sin that had made it so alluring in the first place.

Old Odessa in Its Soviet Context

In 1911 Petr Pil'skii admiringly described the Odessit as a "frivolous boaster," a "magnificent liar," and an "impassioned jokester."[208] But he lamented that Odessa, a great "city of loafers," had no heroes, no emblematic personalities like Tartarin, the swashbuckling adventurer created by the French writer Alphonse Daudet.[209] Within two decades Pil'skii's grievance had been rectified; Odessa had acquired its celebrated heroes, its personalities who were readily identified with Russia's city of sin. Benia Krik, Ostap Bender, and Leonid Utesov were all exemplary Odessits, embodying the criminality, dashing virility, and sardonic Jewish humor that had earlier fused to produce the Odessa myth. Unlike the archetypal Odessit of prerevolutionary Russia, the Soviet-era Odessit was a national icon, and his mischievous charm was infamous all over the USSR. Through his extravagant language, comical deeds, and frenetic music, he brought the myth of Russia's Eldorado to Soviet audiences, who enthusiastically consumed this tribute to the golden age of a lost giddy paradise.

For the puritanical ideologues of proletarian culture, "old Odessa"—whether mythical or real—was not worth commemorating, as it represented an epoch of dissipated corruption, rampant criminality, and unbridled revelry that was fundamentally incompatible with a healthy socialist society; they branded the city of sin's frivolity as an intolerable threat to Soviet morality. But their vitriolic attacks and the subsequent encroaching silence of the Stalin era came too late. The Odessit had already reached maturity; having been weaned off the nourishing bosom of Odessa-Mama, he departed for the wide expanses of the Soviet Union in order to share the many captivating tales of his sinfully gilded homeland. The myth of old Odessa may have been dismantled by the Stalinist state, and its building blocks may have been scattered, but they were not obliterated. Its roots were robust enough to ensure its survival, and its allure was potent enough to stimulate its revival.



Benia Krik, King of Odessa (*Benia Krik,* 1926).

Dvoira Krik's wedding (*Benia Krik,* 1926).

Benia Krik accepts a Torah scroll containing payment for "services" (*Benia Krik,* 1926).

Ostap Bender flees with his wealth over the Romanian border (*Zolotoi telenok*, 1968).

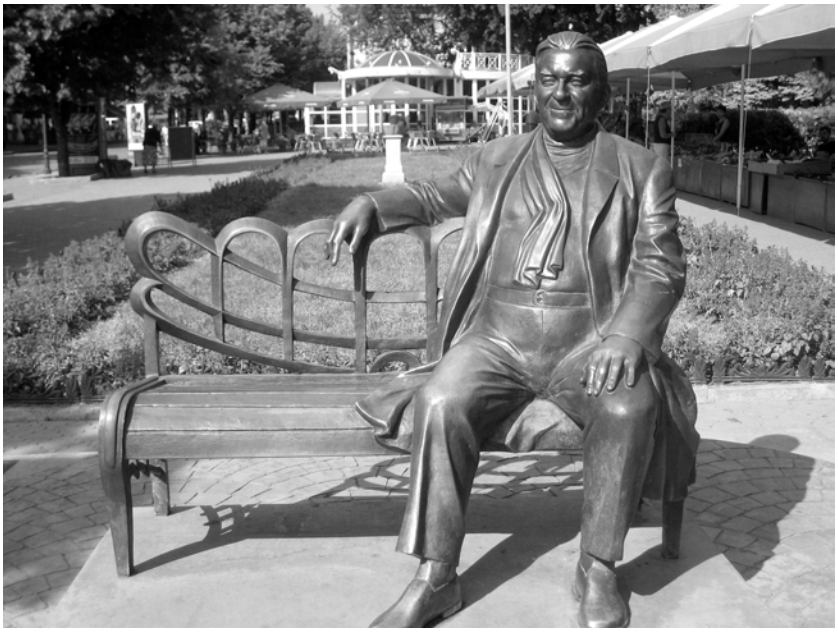
Old Odessa's leading musicians in the film *Intervention* (*Interventsiia,* 1968).

Buba Kastorskii—Odessit, entertainer, charlatan, Bolshevik partisan (*Novye prikliucheniia neulovimykh,* 1968).

Monument to Sashka the Fiddler in Odessa today.

Monument to Mikhail Zhvanetskii in Odessa today.

Ostap Bender's "Twelfth Chair" in Odessa's central garden.



Leonid Utesov greeting visitors in Odessa's central garden.

CHAPTER 4 *Revival and Survival*

The anathematized myth of old Odessa outlasted Stalin and the cultural frost of the General Secretary's twilight years. The subsequent "thaw" in Soviet politics and culture melted the layers of ice that had inhibited the commemoration of Russia's gilded city of sin, and it was not long before the roguish Odessit publicly surfaced, armed with an array of amusing tales from his frivolous homeland. The limited de-Stalinization of the 1950s and 1960s did not, however, signify old Odessa's rehabilitation, let alone its official endorsement, antithetical as it was to the regime's conception of a healthy culture.[1] But it did give mythmakers some room to maneuver, a gray discursive area straddling the middle ground between state-sponsored culture and the world of the forbidden. New technology augmented this public space, with the advent of the tape recorder in the 1960s, a medium through which bootlegged recordings of criminal folksongs and stand-up comedy were produced and disseminated. A new generation of mythmakers also emerged, a fresh cohort of film producers, actors, writers, humorists, and musicians who filled the vacancies left by those who had died, such as Isaac Babel, Il'ia Il'f, and Evgenii Petrov. Most were too young to have personally visited Gambrinus and Café Fankoni, to have observed Mishka Iaponchik's ostentatious banditry, or to have read *Odesskaia pochta*'s sensationalistic vignettes. But this did not matter. The legends had endured as collective memory, and they were bequeathed to the young by those elder mythmakers who had not perished, most notably Konstantin Paustovskii and Leonid Utesov. Self-professed witnesses to a bygone age, Paustovskii and Utesov resuscitated the slumbering Odessit and the notorious city he came from.

As in the previous period the Odessit was marked as both criminal and Jewish, and old Odessa's mythmakers continued to use the techniques of Jewish humor in depicting their mischievous heroes and the city of sin they lovingly called Odessa-Mama. But there was an important difference: Jewish culture had been virtually outlawed during the anti-cosmopolitan campaign of the late Stalin era and was not rehabilitated in any meaningful way until Gorbachev came to power. Yet the abrogation of Jewishness in Soviet culture paradoxically reinforced and even strengthened the mythologized character of old Odessa and its people, as old Odessa had always been implicitly defined as a Jewish city—through the subtle use of Yiddish inflections in Russian texts and dialogues; through the use of traditional Jewish folkloric motifs, without reference to their cultural origins; through the

creation of characters whose gestures, movements, and appearances marked them as Jewish even if their proper names suggested otherwise. Jewish culture may have been forced underground in the post-Stalin era, but the myth of old Odessa often served as a surrogate channel through which some aspects of this culture could be publicly expressed.

The Odessit reemerged in the 1950s, and for the next three decades he would occupy an ambiguous and contentious place in Soviet culture: for some, he was a delightful and enchanting rascal; for others, he was a dangerous virus infecting the Soviet system. But nobody disputed the Odessit's criminal disposition, his Jewish pedigree, and his sardonic wit, which had allowed him to survive in popular consciousness for more than a century, long after his original creators had vanished into history.

Resurrecting Old Odessa

Odessa entered the 1950s on the heels of a tumultuous decade, and, in certain respects, it was a city transformed by World War II and the Holocaust. Nazi Germany's Romanian allies invaded and occupied Odessa in the autumn of 1941, and the city remained under the latter's control until April 1944.[2] With the Romanian onslaught, Odessa's population abruptly dropped from 600,300 to 300,000 through evacuation and mobilization for the war effort.[3] The city remained in demographic flux for the duration of the war, and, on the eve of its liberation by the Soviet Army there were only an estimated 230,000 people living there.[4] Most affected were Odessa's Jews, who, before the war, had numbered 200,000.[5] Many were evacuated when the siege began, but approximately 100,000 Jews—mostly women, children, and the elderly—were still in the city when Romanian control was entrenched in October 1941.[6] Those left behind were rounded up and placed in small ghettos in the outlying regions. According to Igal Kotler, only a few hundred survived the carnage and hunger of occupation coupled with the racially driven massacres.[7] Like much of the western USSR, World War II meant devastation for Odessa and decimation for its people. And like Kiev, Minsk, Leningrad, and a handful of other Soviet cities, Odessa was proclaimed a "hero city" (*gorod geroi*) for having suffered and having struggled against the Axis powers.[8] Odessa became an integral component of state-sponsored Soviet mythology, and was now extolled for its wartime fortitude and bravery.[9]

Through reconstruction and repopulation Odessa recovered from the war's devastation, and by 1959 its population was larger than it had been before the war, with 667,000 residents making Odessa their home.[10] The city's Jewish community, however, never reached its demographic proportions of earlier times. In 1959 there were 106,700 Jews living in Odessa, comprising only 16 percent of the population.[11] This hardly constituted a negligible presence, but their relative weight

vis-à-vis the city's non-Jews and vis-à-vis Soviet Jewry as a whole had significantly dropped.[12] By 1970 the Jewish share of Odessa's population had further declined to 13 percent.[13] And between 1968 and 1980 more than 24,000 of Odessa's Jews emigrated from the USSR, leaving for Israel, Europe, and North America, much like the Jewish inhabitants of other Soviet cities.[14] In demographic terms, Odessa was ceasing to be a "Jewish city," and this process considerably increased once the inception of Glasnost and the subsequent collapse of the USSR eliminated most of the barriers that had precluded a more substantial exodus of Russian Jewry.

But the changing character of Odessa's populace did not impede the resuscitation of the Odessa myth in the post-Stalin era, as the revival did not begin in the city itself. At the dawn of the Soviet era, Odessa's mythmakers (along with the mythologized Odessit they celebrated) had left the city of sin for the wider expanses of the USSR. Old Odessa had, in a manner of speaking, migrated to the capitals and radiated outward to the Soviet heartland through the stories, music, and humor of Utesov, Babel, and others. Few of them ever returned to their cherished Odessa-Mama for an extended period, opting instead to celebrate the gilded city from afar. And those who first resurrected the Odessit during the Thaw did so from a distance as well; they celebrated a city that *may* no longer have existed, since they situated their tales in "old Odessa," which had largely come to signify the first quarter of the twentieth century. It was only somewhat later, beginning in the mid-1960s, that public mythmaking returned to Odessa itself, when a new generation of comedians, musicians, and writers began to mythologize their city from within. Odessan society may have dramatically changed during the Stalin era and World War II, but this did not matter. The myth of old Odessa had taken on a life of its own and its persistence was much less contingent upon the social composition of the city and the disposition of its inhabitants than it had been in previous times.

The myth of old Odessa's revival began in print, with the republication of classic texts and the creation of new ones. Isaac Babel's *Odessa Stories* was reprinted in a collection of his writings for the first time since the 1930s; the ban on Il'f and Petrov's Ostap Bender novels was also lifted, and approximately five million copies were published in the USSR between 1956 and 1979.[15] There was clearly an eager audience for the fiction produced by the mythmakers who had died, and so the living picked up their pens to recount their own tales of old Odessa. The first "new" Odessa story was "Dinars with Holes," written by Lev Sheinin in 1956, as part of his *Diary of a Criminologist* collection.[16] Sheinin was not a native of Odessa, and his purportedly factual tale takes place in Moscow's criminal underworld during the early 1920s.[17] But the star of his story is an Odessit, a thief known by his alias "Admiral Nelson." King of Odessa's bandits like Benia Krik but more reminiscent of Ostap Bender, Admiral Nelson is a garrulous, smooth-talking, multilingual swindler

who is equally proficient in committing sophisticated robbery as in quoting Kant. Although Admiral Nelson did not achieve the widespread infamy of his roguish predecessors, his appearance was nevertheless a landmark for the Odessa myth, for he was the first new Odessit to surface in print during the post-Stalin era.

Sheinin's tale also marked the return of the memoir as a principal genre for the myth's construction, and the memoirists who followed him already enjoyed the popularity and credentials of authentic Odessans that Sheinin may have lacked. Between 1959 and 1960 Konstantin Paustovskii, who had made Odessa his home during the civil war and the early days of NEP, published the fourth volume of his memoirs, *A Time of Great Expectations* (*Vremia bol'shikh ozhidanii*), in which he recounts Odessa's criminality, revelry, and the many writers and entertainers who thrived on the city's sinful glitter during the bygone revolutionary era.[18] Employing the humor of his predecessors, Paustovskii depicts how "dozens of Ostap Benders, as yet undescribed and unrevealed, sauntered past" an observant Il'ia Il'f, furnishing him with material for future stories; how Isaac Babel moved into the home of an elderly Jewish "crib-spotter," an informant for crooks, so he could study the ways of the Moldavanka with its "population of two thousand bandits and thieves"; and how the city's streets resounded with bawdy folksongs including "Bagels," "From the Odessa Jail," and "Shneerson's Wedding."[19] For Paustovskii, old Odessa was "a town where work went with gaiety, as noisy and exuberant as the rolling waves of the sea."[20]

The vilification of Odessa's bawdy street songs by the proponents of proletarian morality did not prevent Paustovskii from quoting such songs in his writings. Neither did it prevent the greatest crooner of such songs from capturing Odessa's bawdy spirit in his own chronicles. Leonid Utesov had first issued a short volume of reminiscences in 1939, but the city of sin only makes a brief appearance in this work.[21] Beginning in the 1960s, however, the great Soviet jazzman became the most prolific raconteur of old Odessa, publishing three memoirs in 1961, 1964, and 1976.[22] Utesov may have ceased recording criminal folksongs during the Stalin era, but he now had a new medium for perpetuating their spirit.

Other chronicles of old Odessa also appeared in print during the post-Stalin era, and it seemed as if anyone who had spent any time in the city believed they had something worth saying.[23] Some chose to condemn the criminality and ridicule the frivolity, whereas others sought to celebrate the city's paradoxical combination of vivacity and danger. But everyone noted the passion and audacity of the Odessit during this epoch of revolution and civil war, during these times of great expectations.

The memoir, however, was just one of many techniques employed by Odessa's mythmakers during the post-Stalin era, as this was a time of technological growth in the Soviet Union.[24] Before World War II there had been few films produced

about old Odessa, with Isaac Babel's *Benia Krik,* released in 1926, being the most noteworthy. From the mid-1960s until Gorbachev's ascension to power, at least a dozen films were produced that either took place in old Odessa or prominently featured an Odessit.[25] Three movies alone were based on Il'f and Petrov's Ostap Bender novels, released in 1968, 1971, and 1977. Some of these films, including the Bender films as well as Lev Slavin's *Intervention,* were purely comical. Others, however, were dramatic portrayals of the tribulations and heroism of the revolutionary era in southern Russia, including *The Elusive Avengers* (1967) and *A Wedding in Malinovka* (1967). In these movies the archetypal Odessit usually played a secondary role. But it was nevertheless a critical role, for he was a stock character who brought comic relief through his trickery and his ability to entertain others with his singing and storytelling.

New technology also meant the widespread production and dissemination of criminal folksongs (*blatnye pesni*). The bawdy street songs of Odessa were, for all intents and purposes, prohibited in the USSR, given the Soviet government's monopoly in the recording industry. Utesov had been attacked during the Cultural Revolution for performing them, and nobody recorded these tunes within the Soviet Union again until the 1960s. What changed was not the government's position but the new possibilities wrought by the introduction of the single-reel tape recorder, with more than one million units being produced and sold to eager consumers between 1960 and 1970.[26] Within a few years underground recordings of criminal folksongs began to circulate, mostly stemming from "private" concerts given by guitar-strumming singers to their friends. The bootlegged tapes were known as *magnitizdat* (tape recorder publishing), the musical equivalent to the better-known *samizdat*—illicitly reproduced and circulated writings that were banned in the Soviet Union.[27] The quality of the recordings was poor, filled with hissing, distortion, various ambient noises, and interplay between the audience and the musician. But this was part of their allure, according to Gerald Stanton Smith, as the *magnitizdat* provided "an outlet for inconsequentiality and triviality, impermissible within the art of Socialist Realism but profoundly needed by most people."[28] Criminal folksongs, write Michael and Lidia Jacobson, were "immensely popular among all segments of society: women and men, young and old, the educated and the ignorant, criminals and law-enforcement agents, dissidents and governmental officials. Russian society was under the influence of criminal culture [*russkoe obshchestvo stalo 'priblatnennym*']."[29] Notwithstanding the obvious hyperbole, the essence of their assertion is valid, if for no other reason than the extraordinary fame of the genre's greatest practitioner, Vladimir Vysotskii.

A talented singer, poet, and actor, Vladimir Vysotskii became a national icon in the Soviet Union during his short life, tragically cut short by his hard living and carousing.[30] He recorded thousands of songs between 1967 and his death in 1980,

both original compositions and traditional underground songs. Vysotskii was not from Odessa and his songs about Odessa only formed a small part of his repertoire, but his attitude, his work, and his reputedly decadent lifestyle, intersected with the city of sin often enough to ensure the Soviet bard an important place among old Odessa's mythmakers. His Odessa-centered films included *Intervention* (1968) and *A Dangerous Tour* (1969), and he regularly performed the classic "From the Odessa Jail" and his own "Moscow-Odessa."[31] Vysotskii's popularity was immeasurable, and death only seemed to increase his legendary status; thousands attended his funeral and just as many would subsequently make annual pilgrimages to his grave.[32] Vysotskii's fame coupled with the technology of the *magnitizdat* allowed the criminal folksong to flourish in the post-Stalin era, despite official condemnation by the guardians of proletarian culture.

Vysotskii was hardly alone in performing Odessa's bawdy street songs and he was not the most prolific promoter of the genre; he was just its most eminent. But the *magnitizdat* helped ensure that other musicians would not be lost to history.[33] In terms of material produced and personal dedication to celebrating old Odessa, pride of place goes to Arkadii Severnyi.[34] Throughout the 1970s he gave a series of "Odessa Concerts" (*Odesskie kontserty*), which were usually recorded in friends' apartments and included all the classic tunes from earlier times, such as "Bagels," "Shneerson's Wedding," "Murka," and "Limonchiki." Like Vysotskii, Severnyi was not from Odessa, and many of his performances (including the very first "Odessa Concert") did not take place in the city itself.[35] But being an Odessit in the post-Stalin era had more to do with one's outlook and one's spirit than the location of one's birth. Severnyi's close friend, Sergei Maklakov, remembers how upon first hearing Severnyi's early recordings, "I was certain that he was a genuine criminal [*nastoiashchii urkagan*], a vagrant [*zhigan*] from the Moldavanka, who had done time."[36] Like Vysotskii, Arkadii Severnyi linked himself to old Odessa by projecting an image that spoke of the city's culture of debauchery and gangsterism.

The criminal folksong was not the only form of officially disdained popular culture that served as a vehicle for the Odessa myth during the post-Stalin era. Of equal importance was the anecdote (or *anekdot* in Russian). Anecdotes in the Soviet Union were generally anonymous and transmitted orally, thereby making it difficult to pinpoint their dates of origin.[37] Although much evidence suggests that jokes mocking the Soviet system and its leaders had already circulated in Lenin's time, most scholars agree that the Brezhnev era (roughly the mid-1960s to the early 1980s), the so-called era of stagnation, was, as Seth Graham puts it, "the apogee of the *anekdot*'s popularity," because of the rampant cynicism toward the stilted rhetoric and increasingly bankrupt ideology of the Soviet state.[38] For Andrei Siniavskii, Soviet anecdotes were

> ineradicable. Given no freedom of speech, no freedom of the press, people take to the anecdote the way a duck takes to water. Thus it has become

> the leading folklore genre, the constant companion of Soviet life, with great influence over the modern language. But despite belonging to the opposition, the anecdote is neither marginal nor alien to Soviet civilization. It is the product of the official Soviet cliché which, when translated into colloquial speech, sounds absolutely ludicrous.[39]

The anecdote was a dynamic form of entertainment whose appeal was largely rooted in its flippant approach to Soviet life and the many taboo subjects the regime sought to eliminate from public discourse. And with its brothels, Jewish gangsters, and immoral merriment, old Odessa was often the focal point of this forbidden humor.

The anecdote and the *magnitizdat* exemplify the diffuse nature of the Odessa myth in the post-Stalin era. And just as Sheinin, Paustovskii, and Utesov revived old Odessa in print at the national level, technology and succinct anonymous humor ensured its sustained commemoration thousands of miles from its point of origin on the Black Sea. But mythmaking did in fact return to Odessa in the 1960s, once a space had been carved out in the public sphere, where Odessans could boast and laugh about their city's magic.

Mythmaking reemerged in Odessa itself in an already familiar form—the theater. During the interwar era Odessa's theaters hosted such plays as Isaac Babel's *Sunset* and Lev Slavin's *Intervention,* both of which featured the city's archetypal Jewish gangsters. In 1953 a new institution was established in the city, the Musical-Comedy Theater (*Teatr muzykal'noi komedii*).[40] Its principal star was Mikhail Vodianoi, who, by the 1970s, had become known as the "King of the Operetta."[41] But the royal title was probably bestowed upon him for reasons beyond his talent, as Vodianoi's greatest success was his performance of Odessa's bandit-king Mishka Iaponchik, in Grigorii Plotkin's hit play *At Dawn* (*Na rassvete*).[42] Leonid Utesov praised Vodianoi, contending that "I saw Mishka Iaponchik, and I believe that Vodianoi looks more like Iaponchik than Iaponchik himself."[43] The play, which, like *Intervention,* takes place in 1919 during the stormy days of revolution and civil war, was incredibly popular, running for nearly a decade during the 1960s and 1970s, and it also served as the basis for a film, *The Squadron Leaves for the West* (*Eskadra ukhodit na zapad*). True to the spirit of old Odessa, Plotkin's Iaponchik not only robbed and chiseled but also sang, danced, romanced, fancied himself a comedian, and manipulated revolutionary ideology to preserve his eroding sovereignty in a city a thieves.

Vodianoi was just one of several entertainers who brought the Odessit back to the stage in the 1960s. Others built their careers in the realm of stand-up comedy, performing in Odessa's various theaters and writing sketches for KVN (*Klub veselykh i nakhodchivykh*), The Club of the Merry and Resourceful, a popular television show in the late 1960s, on which teams of humorists from different cities competed against one another.[44] Some went on to have highly successful

careers, both in Odessa and at the national level, including Roman Kartsev, Viktor Il'chenko, and, most significant, Mikhail Zhvanetskii.[45] Zhvanetskii and Kartsev began their careers together working in Parnas-2, Odessa's student miniature theater, with Zhvanetskii writing much of the material his collaborator performed. Kartsev (according to his own memoirs) first got noticed after playing a comical thief who operated on a tram.[46] But it was Zhvanetskii who would subsequently have the greater impact, and after 1968 he regularly performed his own sketches rather than handing them off to others.[47] Mikhail Zhvanetskii emerged as the emblematic Odessit of the post-Stalin era, with his career spanning four decades as comedian, writer, and president of the Worldwide Club of Odessans (*Vsemirnyi klub odessitov*).[48] Zhvanetskii is a proud Odessit, and his city is equally proud of his achievements, a fact demonstrated by the monument honoring him erected near Odessa's literature museum—the only statue in the city dedicated to an Odessan who is still living.[49]

As in the 1920s, the stage was just one of several outlets through which the Odessa myth flourished at the local level. During the NEP era old Odessa had been celebrated, venerated, ridiculed, and denigrated on the pages of the city's Russian-language periodicals, *Odesskie izvestiia* and *Shkval.* Both had ceased publication at the end of the 1920s, and the periodicals that followed were more concerned with Stalin's Great Transformation than with the persistence of Odessa-Mama. In the 1960s, however, mythmaking returned to the pages of Odessa's press, at first sporadically and cautiously, spearheaded by the Odessan humorist Karp Polubakov (pseudonym of Aleksandr Shnaider), whose column "Polundra" ("Look Out!") appeared with increasing frequency in *Znamia kommunizma* over the course of the decade.[50] Significantly less caustic than the forbidden anecdote, Polubakov's column was nevertheless an important space where old Odessa could cross paths with the deficiencies of the Soviet system. One vignette, published in February 1964, describes an attempted robbery that took place on the city's streets:

> "Your wallet or your life!"
>
> I began to tremble. My hands automatically reached into my pockets.
>
> "OK, OK, I'll give you my wallet!" I fervently assured him, "here—I'm taking the money out of my wallet . . ."
>
> But the bandit grew impatient.
>
> "Come on—no funny business!" he muttered as he ominously waved a knife in front of my nose.
>
> I immediately calmed down.
>
> "Get out of here before I break your jaw you miserable wretch! I know that knife! It was manufactured at our factory. You could not even slice bread with it! You see, our knives are one hundred percent defective . . ."

> I didn't get to finish my sentence as the crook vanished without a trace.[51]

The Odessan bandit was rendered harmless, just as the Bolsheviks had vowed to do. But this dubious achievement was, ironically, the product of substandard Soviet goods rather than the will and might of the builders of socialism.

For more than a decade Karp Polubakov's column was the lone voice in the local press to keep a flicker of old Odessa's glitter alive. But in the summer of 1973 a new evening newspaper appeared, *Vecherniaia Odessa,* and with it came an exponential increase in the publication of humor. Between 1973 and the collapse of the Soviet Union a handful of satirical columns appeared in *Vecherniaia Odessa* under various names, with none appearing more frequently than "Antilopa-gnu" ("Antelope-Gnu"), named after the beat-up jalopy in which Ostap Bender and his cohort of swindlers travel in *The Golden Calf.* The driving force behind the column was Semen Livshin, who had previously written for *Krokodil, Literaturnaia gazeta,* and KVN.[52] Like "Polundra," "*Antilopa-gnu*" was moderate in tone, a mild critique of the shortcomings of life in Soviet Odessa, employing irony and sarcasm to great effect in getting its points across. In January 1977, for instance, the authors poked fun at the horrible conditions of apartments in Odessa in a column titled "Come with a Bulldozer."[53] Another piece discussed how scheming couples were getting married in order to advance their position on the waiting list to acquire a telephone, which often took years in the Soviet Union.[54] Until the abrogation of censorship under Glasnost, the column only intermittently bordered on what was then considered subversive—references to the criminal folksongs, Jewish gangsters, and boisterous merrymakers of old Odessa. Nevertheless, in adopting "Antilopa-gnu" as their moniker, it was clear that Livshin and the column's other contributors sought to inscribe themselves into the genealogy of Odessa's mythmakers, heirs to Isaac Babel, Il'ia Il'f, and Evgenii Petrov.

On stage and in print the myth of old Odessa persisted in the city's public sphere, even if its appearances were intermittent, constrained by the realities of Soviet politics. But the most "public" site of mythmaking in postwar Odessa was, at least for a time, the streets themselves, when the city spontaneously came together to celebrate April 1 as the Day of Humor (*Iumorina*), an annual event that lasted from 1968 to 1976.[55] Odessa's KVN team organized the first *Iumorina,* but events had already been set in motion the year before by *Znamia kommunizma.*[56] The newspaper's editors proclaimed April 1, 1967, to be a "day of laughter and merriment" (*den' smekha i vesel'ia*), dedicating nearly an entire page to the importance of humor for life in general, and for Odessa in particular, since the city produced such seminal satirists as Il'f and Petrov.[57] But the festively designed newspaper spread (in a newspaper that otherwise celebrated the achievements of communism) did not look backward to old Odessa but to the city's potential for reclaiming the torch that

guided laughter and merriment in the Soviet Union. The spread was graced with a banner that alluded to Ostap Bender's legacy, depicting twelve empty chairs over which hovered a billboard reading "vacant spots for satirists."[58] Odessans needed to reassert this important facet of their identity. It was a call to arms.

And many heeded this call, including Mikhail Zhvanetskii, Roman Kartsev, Mikhail Vodianoi, Karp Polubakov, Semen Livshin, members of KVN such as Valerii Khait and Valentin Krapiva, and, perhaps most significant, Odessa's inhabitants themselves. For most of the following decade April 1 served as the city's carnival, a temporary suspension of Soviet normalcy in favor of parades, outrageous costumes, and a return to the frivolous humor of former times. Odessa had been filled with "a million smiles," contended *Znamia kommunizma* on April 3, 1973, as "the entire army of Odessa's masters of humor had been given the unbounded opportunity to demonstrate their talent. . . . Like a mighty surf with gale-force winds, humor had resounded" in the city's streets.[59] When *Vecherniaia Odessa* began its run later that year, *Znamia kommunizma* acquired an ally in promoting the annual event. The association of humor and power persisted in the discourse of the press, as in the following poem, published in *Vecherniaia Odessa* on March 30, 1974, in anticipation of Odessa's day of merriment:

> And we have all been dreaming for long
> that the spirit of war will die
> And we would be left with only one weapon:
> sharp-witted humor [*ostryi iumor*][60]

And it was the people themselves whom Odessa's vanguard of humor sought to mobilize. In anticipation of the festivities of 1974, "Antilopa-gnu" invited readers to submit stories and jokes for a humor contest, with the winners being announced on the eve of the holiday.[61] "Antilopa-gnu" also urged its readers who possessed "antique" cars to parade them through the streets, decorating their own antelope-gnu jalopies with balloons, flowers, pictures, and placards.[62] The city beckoned its people to become a world of roving jokesters, a world, in a manner of speaking, of Ostap Benders.

But the mass mobilization of jokesters crossed the boundary of the permissible in a state where the guardians of culture mistrusted spontaneous celebration. The year 1976 proved to be Odessa's final *Iumorina* during the Brezhnev era, canceled after the event had been severely criticized in party discussions.[63] The festival's greatest promoters—Semen Livshin and the other contributors to "Antilopa-gnu"—remained publicly silent on the subject, and, perhaps as a means of ensuring that April 1, 1977 passed quietly, "Antilopa-gnu" stopped appearing in March of that year, only resurfacing on June 30, 1977.

The Day of Humor is emblematic of how the people of Odessa sought to reassert their identity as merrymakers in the post-Stalin era, once the revival of the Odessa myth at the national level had spurred the former city of sin into action. The emergence of this carnivalesque festival, along with Mikhail Vodianoi, Mikhail Zhvanetskii, Roman Kartsev, "Antilopa-gnu," and Karp Polubakov engendered a new relationship between Odessa and its external promoters. Whereas in the 1920s most of Odessa's mythmakers had left for the capitals never to return, in the 1960s and 1970s Moscow, Leningrad, and Odessa were symbiotically connected. Vladimir Vysotskii came to the city to film his movies;[64] Arkadii Severnyi eventually got to play some of his "Odessa Concerts" in Odessa even if the first few had been recorded in Leningrad;[65] and Odessans were delighted that the cast and crew of the movies *Intervention* and *The Golden Calf* came down from Moscow during the summer of 1967 to shoot on location. With more than a touch of pride, *Znamia kommunizma* described the merriment that overtook Odessa:

> The filming of *The Golden Calf* has only just begun and already the set is teeming with numerous admirers. They are trying to help the producers with their suggestions, advice that could only be given by Odessans—these jolly, witty [*ostroumnyi*], and resourceful people. Could it be otherwise—could *The Golden Calf* possibly be filmed in any other city besides the native land [*rodina*] of Il'ia Il'f and Evgenii Petrov?[66]

This cultural exchange was not unidirectional, as Odessa's performers took their acts on the road to share their tales of old Odessa with anyone willing to listen. Odessa's Musical Comedy Theater toured the Soviet Union, performing Plotkin's *At Dawn,* even giving a show at the Kremlin Theater in 1965.[67] Odessa's Jewish gangster was thus on display within the walls of the Kremlin, perhaps for the first time since Leonid Utesov had played a private concert of criminal folksongs for Stalin himself in the 1930s. But whereas Utesov had chosen to stay in the capital, Mikhail Vodianoi and Odessa's other sojourners returned to the city that had nurtured their talent. The new mythmakers of the post-Stalin era never achieved the eminence of Babel, Utesov, Il'f, and Petrov, but Odessa nevertheless revered them for propagating the city's humor and folklore throughout the USSR.

Mythmaking in the post-Stalin era thus exhibited some critical differences with the process during the interwar period, including a more reciprocal relationship between center and periphery, and a greater diversity of media employed to commemorate and vilify old Odessa. But there were other differences. Before the war a discernable pattern could be seen in the frequency of the myth's production: it flourished during the 1920s, then steadily decreased as NEP gave way to Stalin's Revolution, and then practically vanished during the 1940s. One might expect to see a similar pattern in subsequent decades—a thriving myth during the cultural

thaw of Khrushchev's time which then receded as Soviet culture (and politics) ossified during the era of stagnation. Yet this was not so. Although the limited de-Stalinization of the Thaw during the 1950s and early 1960s had undoubtedly helped to create a public space for the myth's revival, the magnitude of mythmaking during the following decade dwarfed that of the preceding one. Most of the films featuring old Odessa were produced after 1967; "Antilopa-gnu" only reared its head for the first time in 1973; the Day of Humor reached its pre-Perestroika crescendo in the mid-1970s; and Leonid Utesov's third and final memoirs—the entertainer's boldest proclamation about the city of sin and his self-fashioned image as an authentic Odessit—was published in 1976. The production of a myth that was, for all intents and purposes, officially anathematized suffered from the political constraints of post-Stalinist Soviet culture, but it was never snuffed out. There were enough sites of production and genres of mythical artifacts to ensure its survival.

And what the myth suffered from during this era were *constraints,* not outright prohibition. To bifurcate post-Stalinist Soviet culture into "official" and "dissident" realms is to miss its many nuances and the complex relationships Odessa's mythmakers had with the state and its ideology. The myth of old Odessa, in fact, existed on a spectrum of toleration and proscription, often testing the limits of cultural freedom in the USSR. Leonid Utesov and Konstantin Paustovskii re-created and disseminated the city of rogues and schnorrers without rejecting communism and without falling from official grace. Conversely, when the rebellious writer Andrei Siniavskii chose "Abram Terts"—a legendary Jewish gangster from Odessa—as his pseudonym for publishing abroad, it was clearly an act of resistance.[68] Much depended on who the mythmaker was, the way he chose to shape and disseminate his work, and, most significant, the degree of subtlety he used in crafting his references to old Odessa's gilded and sinful ways. And it is precisely in terms of subtlety that the final and most fundamental difference between interwar and post-Stalinist mythmaking becomes apparent: the extent to which old Odessa was portrayed as a Jewish city.

Idioms of Jewishness

Although the state-sponsored anti-Semitism of Stalin's final years in power largely ended under his successors, Soviet Yiddish culture never recovered its vibrancy of the prewar years. A handful of Yiddish cultural institutions and publications did reemerge but on a much smaller scale and without the wholehearted official endorsement they had enjoyed before the war.[69] Part of the problem was the dramatic decline in the use of Yiddish, with barely 20 percent of Jewish census respondents declaring it as their mother tongue in 1959.[70] The Jews were a nation without a viable juridically defined Soviet national homeland, a territory where indigenous political and intellectual leaders could ensure the ongoing development

and dissemination of a national language and culture, much as the Ukrainians, the Georgians, and the Uzbeks had.[71] To be sure, a large percentage of Soviet Jewry had sought to adopt Russian as their principal language of communication (and, accordingly, Russian culture) during the first half of the twentieth century, once they had forsaken the shtetl for the burgeoning Soviet metropolises. But the abandonment of Yiddish did not inevitably lead to the disappearance of Jewish culture, and, as Odessa's history demonstrates, Jewish culture did survive and even thrived after the transition to Russian had taken place. Yiddish idioms and inflections pervaded the Russian spoken in Odessa, and the writers, musicians, journalists, and comedians from the city infused their work with Jewish characters, humor, and folkloric motifs. Stalin's anti-cosmopolitan campaign, however, severely damaged the production of what may be called Judeo-Russian culture in Odessa and elsewhere in the USSR. Stalin and his government not only sought to unmask the allegedly treacherous Jews who were hiding among the Russians cloaked in the guise of Russians; they also sought to eliminate the Jewish impurities that had tainted Soviet Russian culture, and this policy had an impact that outlasted Stalin himself, remaining in effect until Perestroika.

The official Soviet attitude toward the Jews and their place among Soviet nations during the post-Stalin era is best characterized as an attitude of silence, coupled with mild discrimination.[72] There was no longer a "Jewish question" to discuss, according to the regime, as the Soviet government had ended centuries of persecution with its destruction of the old order and the creation of a workers' paradise rooted in "the friendship of all peoples." Jewish suffering during the Holocaust was denied any uniqueness, and the memory of their slaughter was subsumed into the commemoration of all those who had perished at the hands of the Nazis.[73] The many political leaders, cultural figures, soldiers, and scientists of Jewish descent whose achievements were celebrated had no nationality attached to their names. "Jews," writes Yuri Slezkine, "were aliens; Soviet heroes who happened to be Jews were either not true heroes . . . or not true Jews."[74] Jewish characters increasingly vanished in post-Stalinist Soviet literature, and those who surfaced tended to be old. "The younger Jews," writes Maurice Friedberg, "were thought to be completely assimilated to the point where they could no longer be recognized, or to be precise, *should* no longer be identifiable."[75] The Jews were not systematically persecuted under Khrushchev and Brezhnev, but they were without the upward mobility they had sustained during the prewar era. They largely remained an awkward nation among socialist nations, denied the collective benefits enjoyed by other Soviet peoples but burdened with all the liabilities of a definable group often seen as separate and distinct from the Russian majority.[76]

The peculiar and ambiguous place of the Jew in the Soviet Union during the post-Stalin era is reflected in much of the humor produced, particularly (but not

exclusively) in the anecdotes that proliferated and circulated. The following joke underscores the "a-national" status of Soviet Jewry:

> The director of the new Soviet International Symphony Orchestra is introducing his musicians to some foreign journalists:
> "This is Fedorov—he's Russian; here's Murzenko—he's a Ukrainian; Saroian—an Armenian; Chikvili—a Georgian. And that is Rabinovich—a violinist."[77]

Equally popular among Jewish musicians in the conservatory and those playing klezmer music in seedy taverns, the violin was often seen as the quintessential Jewish instrument and a marker of Jewishness. Another joke suggests the indelibility of Jewishness in the USSR, regardless of one's chosen identity:

> A telephone is ringing in the communal apartment.
> "May I talk to Moishe, please?" the voice says.
> A neighbor responds: "We don't have anyone like that here."
> Another phone call: "May I talk to Misha?"
> The neighbor shouts: "Moishe, it's for you."[78]

The Jew did not fit into the Soviet scheme of things, much as nineteenth-century European Jewry also remained an anomaly—God's Chosen People divinely elected for redemption but abandoned to their suffering amid a sea of Gentiles. And just as the shtetls of Eastern Europe proved to be fertile ground for the genesis of Jewish humor, the Soviet Union offered a secularized environment where it could flourish.

Odessa—the epicenter of Russian Jewish humor—had a reputation as a Jewish city, and the attempted elimination of the Jews from Soviet discourse fundamentally influenced the ways in which people wrote and talked about the city and its people, whether in fiction, in humor, or in scholarship. Soviet history books about Odessa almost completely effaced the Jew from their narratives, inasmuch as it was possible to ignore a community that had constituted one-third of the population for nearly a century.[79] Where Jews had to be discussed, they were mentioned in passing, and fashioned to fit an appropriate Marxist-Leninist framework for a Russian-speaking city located in the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic. For V. Zagoruiko, Odessa was the site where "the working class of the two fraternal nations [*dva bratskogo naroda*]—the Ukrainians and the Russians" unified against the capitalist bourgeoisie "largely made up of Greeks and Jews."[80] The Jews were not credited with any of Odessa's contributions to either local or national culture, and, conversely, they were not mentioned in conjunction with the city's notorious criminality.[81] Even Sashka the Fiddler vanished into oblivion: entertainment in Gambrinus was now credited to a "Romanian orchestra."[82] This denial of Odessa's

Jewishness was ridiculed in Soviet anecdotes, much as they satirized Jewish life in the USSR in general. In one joke, an Odessan Jew is asked:

> "Can you tell me, what is the composition of Odessa's population?"
>
> "Ten percent of the people are Russians; Ukrainians—also ten percent; Moldovans make up five percent. And the rest—they are all locals [*mestnoe naselenie*]."[83]

In rendering the Jews of Odessa nameless they were rendered, ironically, the most authentic Odessans, for to be without ethnicity was to be a local and thus a native of the city. Odessa was implicitly a Jewish city, even if the Jews were expunged from the historical record.

But the myth of Odessa continued to grow during this era precisely *because* implicit Jewishness had been one of its defining qualities from the late nineteenth century onward. Jewishness diffused in Odessa, and to be an Odessit was to be Jewish, regardless of one's name or one's (real or professed) ethnic descent. Ranging from subtle to unambiguous, markers of Jewishness abounded in the tales of old Odessa that circulated during the post-Stalin era, and they are apparent in the speech, gestures, and appearances of the (usually shady) characters who dotted the imagined landscape of Russia's Eldorado.

The stereotypical East European Jew has a distinct way of talking, characterized by verbosity, endless digressions, the tendency to answer a question with another question, incessant complaining about one's health, and the use of rapid and erratic gesticulations to accompany one's words. All these attributes were imputed to the archetypal Odessit of the post-Stalin era, and they were usually presented in a humorous fashion, as in the following anecdotes:

> "Is it true that Odessans love to answer a question with another question?"
>
> "Why do you want to know?"[84]

> How is a restaurant in Odessa different from one in London?
>
> In London you see people eat and hear them speak, whereas in Odessa you hear people eat and see them speak.[85]

The Odessit is marked as Jewish, though he exudes elements of Jewishness that are devoid of traditional Judaic practices and rituals.

Such markers of Jewishness have also figured prominently in Mikhail Zhvanetskii's humor. In one of his sketches, written in the 1960s, Zhvanetskii contrasts the mannerisms of people in Riga, Tbilisi, Moscow, and Odessa, with the Odessit speaking as one expects a stereotypical Jew to speak, with some grammatically incorrect Russian thrown in for good measure:

And here's how it is in Odessa:

"Can you please tell me, how can I get to Deribasovskaia Street?"

"Where you come from? [*A sami s otkudova budete?*]"

"I am from Moscow."

"Really? What's going on over there?"

"Nothing. What specifically are you interested in?"

"Nothing. . . . I'm just interested—you're from Moscow, they're from Voronezh, and we are in Odessa, may we all be healthy [*chtob my byli vse zdorovy*] . . . Do you work?"

"Of course I work, but really, I'm asking you: Where is Deribasovskaia Street."

"Young man, why the rush? People stroll leisurely on Deribasovskaia Street."

"But you must understand, I need Deribasovskaia Street . . ."

"I do understand, believe me I understand—I'll take you there myself, even though I have such severe rheumatism. . . ."

"Listen, if you don't know where Deribasovskaia Street is, I'll ask somebody else!"

"You are offending me. You have already offended me. Such a cultivated person as yourself—I can tell by your appearance. I don't have such traits. I've worked for my entire life. Right from the cradle to work [*priamo s gorshka na rabotu*]. Oy, we had it so rough, our mother had eight children. Would you let yourself have eight kids? My mama let herself have eight. She had absolutely no education, but now my children are attending university, and my poor mama, she's now lying in the grave with my brother and uncle. Why not go there now?"

"But you must understand, I need Deribasovskaia Street."

"I understand, but really, is that any way to treat one's parents? If your children don't come and visit you in the cemetery would they be right, do you understand me? Where are you going? Deribasovskaia is around the corner."[86]

In another sketch, also from the 1960s, Zhvanetskii describes how Odessans always carry on conversations with their hands, quipping that "a woman carrying a baby is incapable of telling you anything."[87] But it is ultimately Odessa's unique discourse that makes the city so appealing and exciting, which is why "there are so many writers in Odessa, because they need not invent anything. To write a story, one simply needs to open his window and transcribe what he hears."[88]

Yet Jewish verbosity is not merely funny and thrilling; it is also a source of power and strength. Through linguistic manipulation the Odessit is able to gain control of any situation, like the character Buba Kastorskii, an entertainer from Odessa who doubles as an undercover Bolshevik partisan in several Soviet films from the late 1960s which take place during the civil war.[89] In *The New Adventures of the Elusives* (*Novye prikliucheniia neulovimykh*), Buba's voluble banter, his exaggerated movements, and his comical singing all serve as means for assisting his fellow partisans. When Buba is brought to White headquarters on suspicion of espionage, he turns the tables on his interrogator by annoying him with a long-winded (and utterly nonsensical) scheme to further the cause of the anti-Bolshevik forces:

> "Colonel, I am just the man you need!"
>
> "I don't understand."
>
> "I am sure you are wondering how you can employ me in your cause. Of course it is entirely up to you to decide, it is your right. But I have a proposition for you, and believe me, I'm your man: working as an agent abroad. I've been studying Spanish and I can work for you, say in Argentina. I could work undercover in the guise of a night club agent? So? Have no doubt that I can play this role. You've seen me work on stage?"
>
> "I've seen you."
>
> "OK, so let's suppose someone comes to me looking for work and he says to me 'do you need a waiter?' and I'd answer 'sorry we've already got waiters.' Then he says 'I'm a useful guy,' and I answer in Spanish '*Buenos Aires schlimazel besa me mucho.*' Clever, no? And then in the evenings, while dancing I'll be passing on information to you. Here—how about like this? [Buba starts dancing around the Colonel's office.] And this will mean, in other words, that it is dangerous to come here, no? And I'm fantastic at keeping secrets! I'll tell you a story and then it will all be clear. When I was sixteen years old I gave private lessons—"
>
> "Are you not capable of being quiet?!"
>
> "Yes, of course. . . . Still, I think I'll tell you the story anyway. I gave geometry lessons to the wife of a butcher. To be honest, actually it wasn't his wife, but his son. His wife only came into the picture later. . . . But really the butcher's wife she was beautiful like a goddess, and she loved me like Juliet loves Romeo, you've heard that story haven't you?"
>
> "Will you please be quiet!"

Buba is eventually released but refuses to part without returning to his unfinished tale:

> "I should really tell you the rest of the story about the butcher's wife. This way you'll be convinced that I can undertake any sort of serious mission."
>
> "Some other time. I'm extremely busy now, believe me."
>
> "Good, I'll come back tomorrow."
>
> "No, please leave already."
>
> "Ah, understood, understood, I'll be summoned in secret. I'm an Odessit, I'm from Odessa, greetings to you."
>
> "Good-bye Mr. Kastorskii!"[90]

Buba Kastorskii's duplicity is made possible through his storytelling, with his use of the word "schlimazel" being the sole explicit indicator of Jewishness. "I'm an Odessit, I am from Odessa, greetings!" ("Ia odessit, ia iz Odessy, zdras'te!") is Buba's motto, one that is laden with a deeper significance, for in declaring himself an Odessit, Buba is implying that he is a Jewish charlatan from Russia's city of sin. And, like Benia Krik, Ostap Bender, and other Odessans, Buba Kastorskii is empowered by his Jewish charlatanism.

Most depictions of Odessa's criminals during this era are replete with either meandering monologues or references to the thieves' penchant for speeches filled with hyperbole, complaints, and self-aggrandizement. Much like Ostap Bender, Lev Sheinin's Admiral Nelson speaks in metaphors ("The ambassadors have arrived! Strike up the band! . . . Let us rise to honor the ages!").[91] He repeatedly bemoans his own sufferings—always endured in the service of others—including a near death experience:

> By 7 AM there was not a doctor who would have given a copper for my life, that's how beat up I was. By eight I had one foot in the grave and could smell the dampness. My heart was barely beating and I had no pulse. Manka the Flea, the owner of the joint, just sobbed as she looked at me and wailed: "My poor dear 'Admiral,' what'll we tell them in Odessa? . . . How will we ever explain why we couldn't save your life? They'll set my place on fire!"[92]

Similarly Leonid Utesov describes a speech given by Mishka Iaponchik in 1919, which Utesov, as a member of Odessa's artistic community, felt the need to attend:

> In those days Odessa's artists all knew Iaponchik. The thieves and bandits invited us to their meeting, where the King gave a speech. His speech was filled with an unbelievable mixture of different languages and jargons, densely interspersed with intricate and florid cussing. No professional writer, including myself, could possibly convey his oration, as it was so

> far beyond the bounds of literature. Even a great master like Babel, who in those days was so enamored by the language of these people, needed to soften and embellish it.[93]

Bad language it may have been, but Utesov and Odessa's other mythmakers continued to feel attracted to the Odessit's rhetoric, bombast, and cursing, and they delighted in sharing it with their audiences.

As a master of words, the Odessit is particularly adept at cursing, a practice whose origins trace back to Yiddish.[94] In form and in content, the Yiddish curse survived the transition to Russian in Odessa, and in many stories, films, and anecdotes the curse serves as a marker of Jewishness. Yiddish curses always begin with "may you" (*zolstu*), usually rendered in Russian as "*chtob ty,*" and its presence at the beginning of a phrase alerts the reader that a verbal invective may follow.[95] The following anecdote suggests that cursing, Jewishness, and criminality are inseparable in Odessa:

> What is the worst possible curse in Odessa [*samoe strashnoe prokliatie v Odesse*]?
>
> "May you have to live only on your salary! [*Chtob ty zhil tol'ko na svoiu zarplatu!*]"[96]

Odessa is a city of thieves and not to have an illicitly acquired supplementary income is to suffer humiliation.

Cursing and criminality also cross paths in Paustovskii's memoirs of old Odessa, in his description of Aunt Khava, the crib-spotter's wife, who unleashes her verbal abuse upon the gangster Simon Lop-Ear (*Sen'ka Visloukhii*), after he murders her husband:

> "May you, Simon, get drunk on vodka with rat poison and die in your vomit! And may you kick your own mother Miriam, the old viper [*gadiuka*], for giving birth to such a progeny, such a fiend of hell! May all the Moldavanka boys sharpen their pen knives and cut you into pieces during twenty days and twenty nights! May you, Simon, burn and burst in your own sizzling fat!"[97]

According to Paustovskii, Aunt Khava was to be taken away to an asylum for her ostensibly lunatic ravings. But she is, in fact, speaking the universal language of the Odessit, which is comically rooted in the kvetching and cursing originally brought to the city of sin from the Yiddish-speaking shtetls of the Pale of Settlement.

Language is by far the most common marker of Jewishness employed by Odessa's mythmakers during the post-Stalin era. But there are others, including behavior, physical appearance, and subtle allusions to infamous Odessans of former times. Jewish complaints about one's health have historically been associated with

particular diseases and conditions, such as diabetes (which in nineteenth-century Europe was thought to be a "Jewish illness"), heart problems, and a general anxiety over one's well-being.[98] One popular joke goes as follows:

> The Frenchman says, "I'm tired and thirsty. I must have cognac."
> The German says, "I'm tired and thirsty. I must have beer."
> The Russian says, "I'm tired and thirsty. I must have vodka."
> The Scotsman says, "I'm tired and thirsty. I must have whisky."
> The Jew says, "I'm tired and thirsty. I must have diabetes."[99]

"Jewish illnesses" come up repeatedly in the depiction of Odessan characters. In Plotkin's play *At Dawn,* one of Mishka Iaponchik's lieutenants is almost forced to eat fish soup (*ukha*) against his will but cries out for salvation from this terrible fate, insisting that he suffers from diabetes and the soup will cause him severe agony.[100] Similarly Mikhail Zhvanetskii's sketch, "A Wedding for 170 People," is filled with Odessans who are either complaining about their own health or discussing other people's ailments. It seems as if all 170 guests are suffering from "heart conditions" (*infarkt, mikroinfarkt*), kidney problems, sclerosis, and stomach pains, and, when it is revealed that one of the guests is a doctor, he is immediately inundated by those seeking free medical advice. But this is still Odessa, and, like all Odessan weddings, it is a frenetically paced chaotic event with swarms of people, a profusion of food, and endless toasting, implying that the abundance and glitter of Eldorado are not incompatible with the Jewish ailment.[101] Other exemplary Odessans suffer from neuroses, including Buba Kastorskii, who tells his interrogator: "I am an artist, I can't stand nervous tension. I can't have a breakdown before I go on a big mission."[102] Whereas the archetypal Odessit of the interwar era often transcended the traditional image of the Jew as weak, sickly, and neurotic, his postwar successor was less removed from this legacy of the shtetl.[103]

The Odessit's physical appearance is often a marker of Jewishness (and equally of "Odessan-ness"). In Plotkin's *At Dawn,* Iaponchik's two lieutenants are named Nosatyi ("big-nosed") and Ryzhii ("Red," presumably because of his red hair), both of which are rooted in popular Jewish stereotypes.[104] Sheinin's Admiral Nelson is described as being red-headed and one-eyed, which is a direct reference to Babel's character Froim Grach, who possessed both these attributes. Buba Kastorskii's Odessan-Jewish genealogy is also suggested by his little white poodle that accompanies him around town, a probable allusion to Kuprin's Sashka the Fiddler, whose closest companion was also a small white dog. The Odessit is usually marked as both Jewish and a charlatan, and the mythmakers of the post-Stalin era inherited a set of images, idioms, and signs that they were able to deploy without explicitly revealing where they had originally come from.

Some of these Odessan characters do, in fact, have Jewish-sounding names, such as Paustovskii's Aunt Khava and her husband Tsires (whose unlikely name

means "afflictions" in Yiddish), and the aunt of the bride in Zhvanetskii's "A Wedding for 170 People," named Gerda Iakovlevna Likhtenshtullershpillershtil'.[105] But the relationship between one's name and one's ethnicity in old Odessa is frequently convoluted, which is fitting for a community known for the fusion of different cultures. A presumably Jewish name is often presented in conjunction with an improbable nationality, as with Ostap Bender, whose claim of descent from Turkish Janissaries is patently absurd.[106] In Mark Zakharov's film *The Twelve Chairs,* Bender's biography is presented through a series of still images, beginning with his "Papa," a rather severe-looking bearded man wearing a fez. This is followed by shots of Bender's "many professions," which include a cart driver, a dentist, a convict, the conductor of an orchestra, and an aviator. Bender is depicted as the classic Jewish *luftmentsh* (jack-of-all trades) taken to ridiculous extremes, with his stint in prison transforming him from an ordinary *luftmentsh* into a crooked Odessit.[107] Bender's professed Mediterranean origins is a theme that surfaces elsewhere, most notably in the criminal folksong, "I am Benia-Hooligan the Bandit" ("Ia naletchik Benia-Khuligan"), whose narrator, Benia, claims to be half-Greek and half-Turkish ("Ia i grek i turok popolam") notwithstanding his Jewish name, an obvious allusion to Babel's Benia Krik.[108]

At other times, however, shady characters from Odessa with markers of Jewishness have names that are clearly not of Jewish origin. In the film *A Wedding in Malinovka* (*Svad'ba v Malinovke*), which takes place during the civil war in a small village in southern Russia, one of the principal characters is a charlatan from Odessa named Popandopulo, a stereotypically Greek name. In the tradition of the Odessit, Popandopulo dances, sings about his beloved city of sin, and boasts that, before the Revolution, "I had lots of professions, that's why the Odessa criminal investigation department had me on record" ("Ia imel mnogo spetsial'nostei, za chto i sostoial na uchete v odesskom ugolovnom rozyske").[109] The Revolution ostensibly swept away his formerly sordid life in Odessa, and he is now on the road, employed as an assistant to a Cossack Ataman named Grisha, in whose service he bombastically proclaims to be the "Minister of Finance and Aide-de-camp Popandopulo from Odessa." Popandopulo presents himself as a tough thug, but nobody takes him seriously. His movements are awkward, effeminate, and abounding in exaggerated gesticulations. He fails at the one task his boss assigns him: to induce a young peasant woman (who is already betrothed to another) to marry Grisha. In one instance, Popandopulo's attempt to capture the intended bride is frustrated when she batters him with a big stick. Pleading with her to stop, Popandopulo cries out that he is "shell-shocked" ("ne nado ia kontuzhennyi") and suffers from his fragile "nervous system." And in a nod to Il'f and Petrov's *Golden Calf,* Popandopulo is last seen fleeing with a goose he has stolen, just like one of Ostap Bender's unlucky partners in crime, Mikhail Samuelovich Panikovskii, an old Jewish thief from Kiev. Implicit Jewishness pervades Popandopulo's behavior,

and, in proclaiming himself to be a crook from Odessa, he is admitting to his Jewish pedigree: a corrupt cousin of the equally corrupt Leon Drei, Benia Krik, Mishka Iaponchik, and Ostap Bender—his relatives in everything but name.

The intersection of implicit Jewishness with Odessa's criminality and revelry reached its apogee in Leonid Utesov's memoirs, particularly the final volume, *Spasibo serdtse,* originally published in 1976. The book is a tour-de-force homage to old Odessa, which combines all the elements and approaches used to mythologize the city during the previous half-century. Although occasionally he mentions his own Jewish upbringing, Jewishness is never explicitly imputed to any of the many tales he includes about the city's markets, gangsters, musicians, and writers. His very style of writing, particularly in his lengthy opening chapter, "The Odessa of My Childhood," bears all the hallmarks of Yiddishized Russian discourse, with its frenetic pace, meandering monologues, and intonation. All these techniques are harnessed by Utesov to sell Russia's Eldorado to his prospective readers, to demonstrate that there *should* be room to celebrate a bygone city of merrymakers in their socialist motherland. Reminiscent of Sholem Aleichem's Menakhem-Mendl when he first arrives in Odessa and marvels at its wonders, Utesov feverishly depicts this implausible oasis on the Black Sea:

> Do you know what is Odessa? No you do not know what is Odessa! There are many cities in the world, but none with such beauty. Look at Odessa from the sea, heaven! From the shore! Exactly the same. It cannot be denied [*da chto i govorit*]! When Odessans want to say that somebody lives well, they say: "he lives like God in Odessa [*on zhivet, kak bog v Odesse*]." Try saying this in Odessa: "He lives like God, let's say in New York." They would make a laughing-stock of you or you would be sent to an asylum. This is Odessa![110]

Utesov once lived and thrived in paradise, just as Menakhem-Mendl's wife had earlier accused her husband of doing, "living like God in Odessa" (*lebt zikh op, vi got in ades*), and Utesov adopts this popular nineteenth-century Yiddish expression to make his point.[111]

For Utesov, old Odessa's marketplace was saturated with all the boisterous haggling, kvetching, and cursing one finds in Zhvanetskii's dialogues. "Haggling is the most important thing," writes Utesov, a practice illustrated in the following scene:

> Customer: How much?
>
> Seller: Thirty.
>
> Customer: What?
>
> Seller: Rubles.

Customer: I thought you meant kopecks.

Seller: Ok then, twenty?

Customer: What?

Seller: Rubles.

Customer: Two.

Seller: Unreasonable, may you be healthy.

Customer: Ok, an additional fifty.

Seller: What?

Customer: Kopecks.

Seller: May I not see the sun at night, less than fifteen I cannot do.

Customer: An additional five.

Seller: What?

Customer: Kopecks.

Seller: May I live this way with your wife, I can't do less than ten.

Customer: An additional five.

Seller: OK five, let's shake on it and we'll be done.

Customer: Five what?

Seller: Rubles.

Customer: Knock off two and all is in order.

Seller: I'll knock off one. [112]

Utesov insists that such haggling at the market is necessary because "it is an art form [*iskusstvo*]," one of the many artistic achievements of old Odessa's inhabitants.

And there were other artistic achievements. Utesov (facetiously) credits implicitly Jewish Odessans with the invention of jazz music, an assertion he had initially made through one of his comedic sketches and subsequently recorded in his memoirs, in a piece dubbed "How Orchestras Play at Weddings in Odessa." Utesov tells the story of a customer who needed to procure a cheap orchestra, and those selected by the musician's employment office were incapable of reading music, knowing only various melodies. "And these musicians," not able to read notes,

> each performed as a soloist, in an original free and improvisational manner. This curious way of playing later became popular in America ten to fifteen years later—those small amateur Negro bands in New Orleans. Like those poor Odessan musicians, those in New Orleans did not use musical scores and, freely and at times with inspiration, played variations of well-known melodies.[113]

Jazz was thus invented in Odessa—not in New Orleans—by impoverished "wedding" musicians, and, although Utesov does not mention their ethnicity, they are clearly supposed to be Jewish: many of the popular Soviet jazz musicians were Jews who had come from southern Russia during the interwar era; Jewish klezmer music is an improvised genre of music characterized by wailing fiddles and clarinets, which Utesov had played in his youth and subsequently used in his recordings of criminal folksongs; and, finally, Odessa had already been mythologized as a city of deviant musicians, who performed in brothels, in taverns, and at profligate gangster weddings. Accordingly, Soviet jazz was invented by the crafty Jewish Odessit, whose musical "originality" was actually the product of his expertise in feigning technical proficiency.

But the Jewishness of this tale may, in fact, be deeper than its oblique references to Jewish musicians and klezmer music, for Utesov's skit bears a striking resemblance to a nineteenth-century folktale about scheming Jewish musicians. In the small village of Pitovska, located in Volyn Province, a Polish landlord decided to throw a lavish affair on his estate. Because of the absence of local musicians, the landlord's chief overseer was compelled to hire a Jewish orchestra from Zaslaw, the provincial capital. Intent on impressing his boss and his affluent guests, the overseer informed the leader of the troupe, Yankel the Fiddler, that his musicians must be professionals, capable of playing from sheet music. Yankel accepted the gig, even though his musicians—like most impoverished *klezmorim* in Russia's Pale of Settlement—could not read music. "Not to worry," Yankel reassured the members of his apprehensive orchestra, "bring along a music stand and a Hebrew book—a prayer book, a Talmudic text, anything. Pretend to read your Hebrew book while playing."

The musicians faked their way through the affair, playing their improvised music to the delight of the unsuspecting guests. One man, however, had studied music and remembered hearing that Jewish musicians were typically amateurs who lacked musical training. When the orchestra took a break, he went up to the stage and glanced at the Hebrew volumes laid out on the stands. Surprised at what he saw, the guest asked, "what is this some kind of magic or witchcraft?" The musicians were on the verge of panicking, but Yankel quickly took control of the situation and insisted, "No, this is a special kind of musical notation, known only to Jewish musicians. It's our secret code, which nobody else can read." Not recognizing the Hebrew alphabet, the perplexed guest shrugged his shoulders and then moved on. The *klezmorim* continued to play, and the party was a great success.[114]

Although this story may be apocryphal, it implies that klezmer musicians were not only clever charlatans but were also adept at achieving their acquisitive ends by employing props of Judaic origin, much as Babel's gangsters used their Jewishness to further their criminality. It is impossible to know whether Utesov had ever heard

this story, but it would not be the only time that he borrowed from Jewish folklore to embellish his writings. In another instance, Utesov draws on a well-known story from the tales of the Wise Men of Chelm, a community of Jewish schlemiels whose misadventures were popular among nineteenth-century shtetl dwellers and remain so today in America and Israel. The original tale is about a Chelmite who leaves his town to visit Warsaw, but he gets lost and unwittingly returns home, where he lives out the remainder of his days thinking that he is, in fact, in Warsaw, among people who merely happen to resemble the Chelmites he left behind.[115] Utesov uses this story in describing Babel and his alleged longing to return to Odessa, which he had left in the early 1920s. That the story stems from Jewish folklore would be unknown to Utesov's readers unless they are well versed in the escapades of the Wise Men of Chelm.[116]

Utesov grew up in Jewish Odessa, and, just as he had previously used his music to celebrate Odessa as a Jewish city of sin, his memoirs served as his chosen medium in the post-Stalin era. Through his writings, Utesov effectively constructed old Odessa as a Jewish city, using a Yiddish-inflected narrative style, pervaded with Jewish characters, fables, and witticisms. But it is an implicit Jewishness, an approach that had been used by many of Odessa's mythmakers before Utesov. Utesov merely refined this technique and ultimately perfected it during the mid-1970s, a period often considered to be the nadir of Soviet culture in general and Soviet Jewish culture in particular.

And perhaps Utesov's success at writing Jewish stories about old Odessa without any Jews helps explain the fate of the 1968 film *Intervention*, which was not released until 1987. The story follows a plot line that characterizes the Odessa myth, since it takes place during the civil war and depicts how Bolshevik forces combated the foreign interventionists who sought to use Odessa as a base to recapture control of Soviet Russia and terminate the Revolution. Like Plotkin's *At Dawn,* the movie features Odessa's archetypal gangsters, who dominate parts of the city, supply opposing forces with weapons, and fashion themselves as both revolutionaries and loyalists to the old regime, depending on the exigencies of the moment. But unlike most of the depictions of old Odessa that date from the postwar era, the city is explicitly (and entirely) Jewish: the scores of musicians who appear in various scenes—all playing the violin—are improbably dressed in Hasidic garb; the little old pharmacist is Jewish (and also a violinist); Filipp the bandit admits to having been in the synagogue (apparently to hear the choir sing); and the elusive revolutionary, played by Vladimir Vysotskii, is named Evgenii Izrailevich Brodskii. Even Madame Ksidias, who is from a prominent merchant family and is presumably Greek, is familiar with the local idiom—Judeo-Russian thieves' cant—a fact revealed to viewers when she ironically shouts "Sha! Sha! Sha!" at her son after he declares that his father was a thief.[117] The old Odessa depicted in *Intervention* is

undeniably a Jewish city, and the different characters come together at the point where Jewishness, revolution, criminality, and comedy intersect with one another. In this sense, the film is an exemplary artifact of Odessan lore but one that crossed the boundary of the permissible in postwar Soviet culture.

Miron Chernenko, who worked in the Soviet film industry, maintains that *Intervention* was not released—could not have been released—in 1968 because it was too Jewish.[118] For Chernenko, Soviet Jewish culture was a casualty of Stalinism. But such a conclusion is misleading: although Soviet Jewish culture during the post-Stalin era did not flourish as it had before World War II, it was far from extinct. Jewish culture could exist in the USSR so long as it remained within certain boundaries, subtle and implicit, whether through Yiddish-inflected monologues, comically shady characters, certain physical features, or references to folkloric motifs that had originally developed at other times and in other places.

The Master Plot

In certain respects the Odessa myth served as a surrogate channel through which Jewish culture could be produced and disseminated in the post-Stalin era. Old Odessa was implicitly a Jewish city, and depicting it entailed the use of what may be called idioms of Jewishness. But old Odessa was not just any Jewish city, as it was also a Judeo-kleptocracy: its criminality and iniquity were no less integral than its Jewishness was to its governing myth. And just as markers of Jewishness became more succinct during this era, old Odessa's criminality crystallized into a recurring narrative, a story line with a standardized set of events, themes, and characters. By the early 1960s old Odessa was virtually delimited by a "master plot" whose contours followed a familiar pattern that had gradually taken shape during the previous fifty years.[119] Isaac Babel had built his vision of old Odessa using the material produced by the myth's founding fathers, and the mythmakers of the post-Stalin era looked back to Babel's gangsters for their inspiration. Most of the memoirs, fiction, and films of this period followed the master plot thematically, and audiences could identify the resultant tales as Odessan by a set of markers that were more explicit than their concomitant markers of Jewishness, but no less standardized.

The governing narrative of old Odessa is a relatively straightforward tale. With a few notable exceptions it is set during the revolutionary era, the civil war, or the early days of NEP (approximately 1917 and 1923), when Odessa and its inhabitants got swept up in the chaos unleashed by Imperial Russia's collapse and the subsequent Bolshevik seizure of power.[120] The prevailing anarchy of this era abetted the proliferation of criminality and dissipation in the city, with the Moldavanka's notorious gangsters further entrenching their already hegemonic place as rulers of the streets. But the arrival and ultimate success of Bolshevism compelled the Odessit to

fashion himself a new image for these times of upheaval. Russia's Eldorado hovered over the precipice of extinction, and the Odessit was on the brink of losing his home, the golden calf whose bosom had nourished him since the city's foundation. He needed to survive and, he hoped, to continue to thrive as old Odessa gave way to the proletarian dictatorship.

Although the many tales of old Odessa produced in the post-Stalin era unfold within these discursive and temporal boundaries, the master plot is far from homogeneous. The archetypal Odessit of this era goes by various names, including Mishka Iaponchik, Filipp the Anarchist (*Fil'ka-Anarkhist*), Ostap Bender, Popandopulo, Buba Kastorskii, and Admiral Nelson. He is often situated within his city of sin, although at other times he is on the road, a nomadic remnant of old Odessa searching for a place to fit in. Mishka Iaponchik is by far the most common incarnation of the Odessit and the only one who actually lived. But all these characters share similar attributes, insofar as they represent the personification of old Odessa—its Jewishness, its criminality, its iniquity, and its frivolity. There is also some variation in the way the story of old Odessa is recounted: in the humor and irony used in depicting the city and its people; in the tone adopted by the mythmaker in exposing Odessa as both gilded and wicked; in the depiction of the Odessit who usually claims to be a sincere participant in the Revolution; and in the ultimate fate of the Odessit whose city is decimated by the intrusion of Soviet power. Old Odessa had its share of proponents and detractors in the post-Stalin era, and their often divergent (but not necessarily contradictory) perspectives shaped the way they chose to deploy the governing tropes in weaving their narratives.

By the post-Stalin era "old Odessa" (*staraia Odessa*) had largely become synonymous with the revolutionary period. It was not as though the city's earlier years were not also regarded as "old Odessa," but the tumultuous years of civil war and the concomitant disintegration of the state represented old Odessa's culminating moment; it was almost as if the previous century of sin and merriment had been compressed and conflated into the span of less than a decade. "Under the conditions of civil war all of [Odessa's] exoticness swirled up like a tornado," maintains A. M. Argo, "reality became an inconceivable fantasy; the Odessan philistine became ridiculous in his fright, wild in his bitterness."[121] It was old Odessa's last gasp, and its merrymakers refused to be consumed by revolution without a final burst of their deviant energy.[122]

Bedlam reigned on the streets of revolutionary Odessa as successive interim governments crumbled and occupational forces sought unsuccessfully to fill the vacuum. As Paustovskii describes it:

> The bars were noisy all night—women shrieked, glass and china broke and shots rang out—the defeated were settling their accounts among themselves, sorting out who was who, and which of them were betrayers

> and destroyers of Russia. The white skulls on the sleeves of the officers of the "battalions of death" were yellow with grease and mud, and no longer frightened anyone.[123]

"Oy, Odessa-Mama," what's happened to you!" bewails the choir in Plotkin's musical comedy *At Dawn.*[124] The plethora of foreign interventionists, counterrevolutionaries, and bandits inundating the city meant a constant state terror for those awaiting the arrival of Bolshevik forces. Crime reached epidemic proportions. Fedor Fomin, a Chekist stationed in Odessa to deal with the turmoil, recalls that period in his memoirs:

> This massive, formerly rich, noisy, and crowded city lived in a perpetual state of panic and fear. Not only at night, but even during the day, people were scared to go out on the streets. Every inhabitant's life was constantly threatened with danger. Vicious thugs stopped men and women in the streets in broad daylight and took their valuables and rummaged through their pockets. Bandit raids on apartments, restaurants, and theaters became commonplace.[125]

These were times, Mikhail Zhvanetskii quips, "when the power of art was such that you could get a bullet in the head for writing a couplet, since everybody was armed."[126] Old Odessa was a place of danger, and the city lived by its weapons and its wits in the face of a turbulent present and an uncertain future.

But old Odessa had *always* been a place of danger, and these frenzied conditions were merely a change in degree, not condition. Old Odessa's legendary danger and chaos had persistently attracted the adventurer and the vagabond, and it continued to exert its magnetic pull on all sorts of people, even during these times of heightened troubles. The torrential flow of people into Odessa mushroomed, as those seeking refuge now included deposed Russian officials and former beneficiaries of the old regime. Boris Chetverikov vividly depicts the motley crew of newcomers, describing how "Odessa became a packed bus" full of those in search of sanctuary: "bureaucrats, multimillionaires, generals. . . . And who was not here then! . . . Maids of honor and courtesans, clergymen and millers, . . . all sorts of plenipotentiaries, merchants, attachés, adventurers of all stripes, spies, thieves, and preachers."[127] But the deluge of human diversity added to the city's colorful street life, and a sense of looming apocalypse merely incited the festivities to new heights. According to Utesov,

> There was barely any order within the city. In this boastful colorful flamboyance one could feel a sense of doom, not power. The interventionists understood that they had little time left to carouse in this foreign land, so they hurried. It seemed as though all they did was amuse themselves. The cafés, restaurants, and gambling houses were packed full.[128]

Old Odessa had been born and then came of age amid mayhem and delirium; revolutionary disorder was just another moment of feverish carnival for those who continued to seek its sinful waters.

And every Odessit continued to seek these sinful waters, because old Odessa was (and had always been) a city of sinners. In Paustovskii's words:

> Three thousand bandits from the slums of Moldavanka, with Mishka Iaponchik at their head, looted half-heartedly. They were sated with fabulous loot from their previous raids. All they wanted was to relax from this strenuous occupation. They cracked jokes more than they pillaged, they crowded the nightclubs, singing the heart-rending lay of [film star] Vera Kholodnaia's death.[129]

The bandits "gave the impression," writes Utesov, "that they had had their fill of colossal robberies during prerevolutionary days, those robberies that had scared and enraptured the city. They settled down and no longer pursued glory, and they had enough to live on, in any case."[130] Euphoria continued to grip Odessa-Mama, and this ecstasy was celebrated in song:

> I loved to visit this bar in Odessa
>
> And fill my tumbler with wine
>
> All the criminal elements gathered here
>
> And we sang "Gop so smykom" until dawn . . .
>
> We were outwardly delicate to the pigeons [*fraery*]
>
> And with the cops [*musory*] we drank muscat
>
> And even the judges and prosecutors did not disdain to eat with us.[131]

As old Russia was engulfed by the fires of revolution and war, old Odessa continued to thrive, for the wicked paradise by the Black Sea had germinated within the fires of hell. Eldorado and Gomorrah were the two faces of old Odessa; they needed each other to survive. The invading armies of Soviet power knew this well, and they vowed to bring the story of old Odessa to its logical, inevitable, and apocalyptic conclusion.

But the city of sin was not going down without a fight, and the Odessans who came forth to do battle adopted the weapon most appropriate for the Jewish charlatan: the exploitation of revolutionary ideology. Accordingly, the coming of the Bolsheviks was treated as an opportunity—a new beginning rather than an end, a chance for the crafty Odessit to carve out a space for himself within the encroaching proletarian state. The Odessit fashioned by the mythmakers of the post-Stalin era was the corporeal embodiment of old Odessa, and his coming to the Revolution was the crux of the master plot.

The encounter between the Revolution and the Odessit did not always take place in Odessa itself; the meeting ground largely depended on when the encounter occurred. During the civil war the city was still the Odessit's gilded kingdom, and the Jewish rogue usually appeared in the form of the gangster-king of the Moldavanka. Much as Babel had earlier depicted Benia Krik, Mishka Iaponchik and Filipp the Anarchist presided over old Odessa, with their power initially still intact. Conversely, when the Odessit surfaced during NEP—once the Revolution had allegedly decimated old Odessa—he was usually on the road, a vestigial wanderer from his now proletarianized city. Lev Sheinin's Admiral Nelson came to Moscow to serve the Bolsheviks in the early days of NEP, around 1923; the Admiral was no longer a king, but he still retained influence among his former subjects. Finally, there is Ostap Bender, the last of the Odessans, who scoured the Soviet Union at the end of NEP in a (futile) search for a new kingdom where he could practice his mischief and live a life of pleasure. But despite these different settings, the stories follow a similar pattern, one that documents the last escapades of the Odessit as the symbolic end of old Odessa.

The Odessit was a mighty opponent; he radiated the strength and charisma emanating from his enchanted city. Mishka Iaponchik "was courageous and enterprising," maintains Utesov, and "he held within his grasp all of Odessa's criminals and ruffians. Had he lived in America he would have undoubtedly had a great career, even treading into the world of Al Capone, the celebrated gangster from New York."[132] According to Aleksandr Lukin and Dmitrii Polianovskii, "Iaponchik's men inspired terror among Odessa's cattle traders, shopkeepers, merchants, and those who resigned themselves to paying him off with the generous tribute demanded during their robberies."[133] "The police were on his payroll," Lukin and Polianovskii continue, "and the law bashfully looked the other way."[134] The White Army feared Iaponchik, Utesov insists, and "would not dare risk searching for him in the Moldavanka—his powerbase—even with a large number of troops."[135] When General Denikin's forces tried to crush his supremacy and arrest him, their headquarters were threatened with assault by a "cavalcade of carriages" on which sat Moldavankan bandits "armed with sheaves of grenades," coming to liberate their king.[136]

The Odessit exerted a mesmerizing effect on those around him. The Chekist Fomin—who was not an Odessan—notes with shock how his local assistant, Dombrovskii, appeared to be an admirer of Mishka Iaponchik. According to Fomin, Dombrovskii "spoke lightheartedly—I would say even merrily—when he described Iaponchik's position in Odessa: sure he terrorized the whole city, but he was a commander [*komendant*] who does everything he likes with his own personal detachment."[137] Iaponchik enjoyed a private table at the posh Café Fankoni, where all of Odessa's leading merchants and businessmen flaunted their wealth.

"Here Mishka felt," write Lukin and Polianovskii, "as if he were an equal among equals."[138] But in an effort to style himself as a latter-day Robin Hood, Iaponchik periodically spread his ill-begotten riches by organizing "sensational feasts [*shumnyi pershestvo*], consisting of tables bursting with free food and pails full of vodka. As a show of gratitude for the free drinks, the poor folk [*golyt'ba*] of the Moldavanka named him their king."[139]

With the coming of the Bolsheviks, the Odessit took his professed esteem for the destitute to a new level, by offering his services to aid the Revolution. Utesov maintains that "it [now] felt as if Soviet power was here to stay. Everybody understood this, even kings from the Moldavanka, even the most senior 'king'—Mishka Iaponchik."[140] Fedor Fomin describes how Iaponchik showed up unannounced at his office in the spring of 1919, comporting himself as if he were an equal, even a colleague of the Soviet official:

> "I am the well-known bandit Mishka Iaponchik. I hope you've heard of me?" he began immodestly. . . .
>
> Mishka Iaponchik began to tell us about himself, his friends, and how they operated. He vividly described his escapades in Odessa. They did rob, but, as he put it, only from the bourgeoisie who fled to Odessa from all corners of Soviet Russia. They also "pinched" [*prikhvatyvali*] a little bit from the local, Odessan bourgeoisie. His men raided banks, gambling houses, clubs, restaurants, and other establishments, from which they could profit.
>
> "With the coming of Soviet power, all this will stop," he assured. "I ordered my guys not to touch anybody within the city. . . . I give you my word of honor," Mishka stated, "that there will be no more robberies and raids. And if somebody tries anything—shoot them. We have decided to abandon our old ways. Many of my men are already serving in the Red Army, some have gotten jobs . . . But I have not come to repent. I have a proposal. I would like the men under my command to join the ranks of the Red Army. We want to fight honorably for Soviet power. Can you give me a mandate to form a Red Army division? I have men and weapons, and need no money. I just need permission and quarters."[141]

To eliminate any skepticism, Iaponchik passionately declared to Fomin that "I taught my men how to steal and rob, and I can teach them how to fight honorably and to defend Soviet power!"[142] Iaponchik was given his mandate, and, as a self-styled hero for the toiling masses, the Odessit organized his troops into a proletarian militia.

As the Odessit's authority was rooted in his ability to manipulate words and transform his identity, he used his linguistic skills and showmanship to persuade his people to follow him on his quest for justice. With great humor, Utesov describes

the gathering of Iaponchik's rabble of crooks, where the king unleashed his political platform, imploring them to abandon their former ways and accompany him into battle:

> The barracks' courtyard is full for the organizational meeting of the regiment. The "recruits" and their "ladies" [*damy*] are here. Screams, guffaws—an unimaginable racket. Mishka ascends the improvised tribune, wearing his service jacket, riding breeches, and jackboots. Mishka is trying "to formulate his speech," to win over his men, but his words are drowned out by wild guffaws and cries, and his speech transforms into a dialogue between the orator and his audience:
>
> "Brothers! They [the Bolsheviks] have put their trust in us, and we must hold the [Soviet] flag high."
>
> "Mishka! You hold the sack and we will pour in the potatoes."
>
> "Shush. We need to demonstrate our new ways. Enough stealing. Enough maiming [*kalechit'*], let's prove that we can fight."
>
> "But Mishka! What will our old ladies [*baby*] do, they will demand food [*zakhochut kushat'*]?"[143]

Iaponchik was not the only Odessit to use his oratorical skills to demonstrate the alleged integrity of his devious community. At the request of the Moscow Cheka, Admiral Nelson rebuked the Soviet capital's underworld for their counterrevolutionary tendencies, after some precious coins had disappeared from a Soviet official's collection. The Admiral proudly reported to Moscow's criminal investigators that,

> yesterday, straight from the station, I got the boys I wanted together and held a plenary meeting. I made such a speech that they all wept. "You damned counterrevolutionary hydras," I said. "You have no conscience, you *zhlobs!* How could you dare to put the screws on a Commissar and grab a few stinky coins to shorten his valuable existence! Just because of some lousy dinars with holes you've been keeping a member of the government from important affairs of state, you Denikinists! I had to leave all my business in Odessa and dash up here only to say: *feh!* They were spitting gall in the Moldavanka hideout for three days when they heard what you'd done, you Makhnovites! It's too low for words!" I spoke for at least half an hour, no less, and they had to give me three glasses of water, that's how excited I was. . . . The cream of Moscow was there! And they swore to stop working until they found the damn coins that disgraced us all.[144]

The thief from Odessa was a bandit with a social conscience, who "has never touched a penny of government or co-operative money" since the coming of the Revolution, and, he insisted, his honor was a quality shared by all his Odessan underworld associates.[145]

The Odessit used the Revolution to survive, but in pledging loyalty to the working class he did not adopt the discipline and austerity usually expected from professional revolutionaries. The life of the reformed Odessit continued to be filled with the decadence and excessive merriment of former times. Iaponchik refused to take his troops into battle without throwing a wild and lavish banquet in his own honor. Fomin describes the event:

> Iaponchik asked for permission to throw a farewell "family" soirée for his detachment. Permission was granted and he chose the conservatory building for the occasion. Some of our commanders were curious about this banquet and went to take a look. Among the guests were many women, many of whom had formerly helped out their friends by hiding and selling stolen goods and valuables. They were wearing brightly colored silk dresses, which sparkled from the jewels adorning them.
>
> Long tables were set up on the hall's stage. Everything was laid out in grand style, with chic, in an obvious attempt to startle [the guests] with its brilliance. There was an abundance of wine, hors d'oeuvres, and fruit. Mishka Iaponchik sat in the middle, in the most respected place.
>
> The "family" soirée went on until morning.[146]

Revolution did not impede the Odessit's enduring quest for revelry. Nor did it terminate his womanizing. In Plotkin's *At Dawn* a voracious Iaponchik tries to seduce the starlet Vera Kholodnaia:

> Vera: What can I do for you?
>
> Mishka: I will explain why I'm here: you will either come and settle in my palace on Miasoedovskaia Street, or I will stay here at your place.
>
> Vera: I don't understand?
>
> Mishka: We'll be married. You—the queen of the silver screen, and I—the king of the Moldavanka. Not such a bad dynasty?
>
> Vera [*smiling ironically*]: I'm not looking to get married.
>
> Mishka: That's what all ladies say, before they say "yes"! I will give you a fine life, and you'll have nothing to fear: you'll have armed bodyguards, a personal chauffeur, and an open spending account in any store in Odessa.[147]

Although Vera rejects his advances (but not before they sing a duet together), Iaponchik moves on with his regal bearing intact, ready to pursue other schemes involving intrigue, romance, and deception.

The use of romance to achieve ignoble ends is common among Odessa's swindlers and charlatans, a practice that traces back to Semen Iushkevich's *Leon Drei.* In both film versions of *The Twelve Chairs,* Ostap Bender uses his suave and

sophisticated charms to seduce a woman who owns one of the chairs that may contain the jewels he covets. Mesmerized by his charisma, she quickly agrees to become Mrs. Bender, only to awaken on the very first morning of matrimony to discover her spouse has absconded with her property. But the wedding party was nevertheless an evening of merrymaking, and Bender made sure that he, his bride, and their guests all enjoyed themselves, for although weddings, banquets, speeches, and concerts are always a means to a devious end for the Odessit, the *process* itself is part of the pleasure; the Odessit is a performer, an artist whose ostentation is an integral part of his identity.

As an artist, the Odessit thrives on the public spectacle, which, for Mishka Iaponchik, meant the opportunity to parade his officially endorsed Red Army detachment through Odessa's streets. According to Lukin and Polianovskii,

> Iaponchik did his utmost to ensure that this event would remain in the memory of Odessans for a long time to come.
>
> In the front were the musicians, who were gathered from all over the city. Trumpeters and flautists from the opera house, indigent fiddlers who begged in courtyards, accordionists from the Slobodka's pubs—all of them strode alongside [the bandits], playing marches and Moldavankan criminal folksongs.
>
> Behind the orchestra was Iaponchik himself, riding a white stallion and wearing a leather cap, . . . an officer's coat, and red riding breeches with gold laces. His weaponry consisted of two Mausers, an Uhlan broadsword in a shining nickel-plated sheath with a notched little wheel at the end.
>
> Beside him his men carried a huge raspberry-colored velvet banner embroidered with the regiment's entire name: "The First Invincible Revolutionary International Odessan Iron Regiment 'Death to the Bourgeoisie!'" . . .
>
> Window panes shook, the orchestra thundered, the red banner was unfurled, and the bandits walked along the streets in a slow procession, sweating from the weight of their weaponry—rifles, pistols, grenades, and cartridge belts sufficient to arm an entire division.[148]

The Revolution was a chance to perform, a chance for the well-armed gangsters to dazzle audiences with their splendor and absurdity.

Criminality and artistry had always enjoyed a special relationship in old Odessa, and the two continued to flourish in tandem. Utesov maintains that his performances of criminal folksongs enthralled the public *because* crime was rampant.[149] In a "Salute to the Theater" Zhvanetskii extols this time of blooming creativity, thanks to Iakov Iadov, Mishka Iaponchik, Leonid Utesov, and Iza Kremer, mentioning the three musicians and the one gangster in the same breath, as if their respective roles were one and the same.[150] Utesov himself has been mythologized

no less than Iaponchik as an intermediary between the world of art and crime, and the two Odessans supposedly maintained an intimate bond. In an interview from 1982, Mikhail Vodianoi describes Utesov's authority in the underworld, with a few colorful vignettes Utesov had earlier shared with him:

> In those distant years Ledia [Leonid Utesov] worked as a balladeer [*kupletist*], and among his admirers was Mishka Iaponchik. He often attended Utesov's concerts. . . . But on one occasion a frightened colleague came running to Leonid Osipovich and begged: "Ledia, my tuxedo was stolen. This is a disaster. Tell Misha [Iaponchik] that I cannot work without it."
>
> So Utesov accompanied the victim to Café Fankoni . . . which served as Iaponchik's headquarters. Utesov expounded the crux of the matter. Iaponchik darkened and turned to his assistant: "What did you do? You've deprived a man of his sustenance. He better have his coat back within half an hour." And within half an hour the suffering performer received . . . eighteen coats to choose from.[151]

Odessa's Jewish gangsters respected the performing arts, since they saw themselves as artists; they coveted the spotlight as much as they sought to fleece the city's inhabitants.

The conflation of bandit and artist, criminality and spectacle, robbery and revolution rendered the gangster humorous, an ironic emblem of what made old Odessa unique. And Odessa's residents allegedly soaked up Iaponchik's public processions with relish. In the words of Lukin and Polianovskii:

> Thousands of gapers [*zevaki*] poured out to gawk at this fantastic spectacle. The spirited philistines of Odessa, susceptible to everything colorful and unusual with astonishing ease believed that the bandits had "reformed themselves." They even prided themselves on "their" bandits: where else could you find such a city, where even robbers ("Have you heard, even robbers") have gone to fight for Soviet power! They waved handkerchiefs, wished them a safe journey and victory, forgetting that these very people had quite recently reduced their lives to an utter nightmare, one that never ceased, neither day nor night.[152]

Utesov similarly notes how "Odessans looked at them and laughed: 'What a comedy!'"[153] It was as if the Revolution was little more than an absurd game for everyone in Odessa, with gangsters, victims, entertainers, and spectators all colluding to perpetuate the city's sinful merriment.

And it was the utter absurdity of the Odessit that characterized his place within the myth of old Odessa during the post-Stalin era. Whereas earlier mythmakers such as Babel stressed the dashing, romantic, and commanding attributes

of the Jewish gangster *along* with his humor, the postwar generation of mythmakers placed more emphasis on his foibles and his schlemielesque demeanor. Utesov—who may rightfully be called Mishka Iaponchik's unofficial biographer—insisted that Iaponchik was not the romantic figure Babel depicted in his *Odessa Stories.*[154] Yet Utesov crafted a bandit who was just as comical and replete with paradoxes. Iaponchik was supposedly "brave and enterprising," and yet "he went pale at the sight of blood. There was once an incident, when one of his subjects [*podannyi*] bit his finger, and Mishka screamed bloody murder [*oral kak zarezannyi*]."[155] As a master dissimulator, Iaponchik proclaimed his loyalty to communism, and yet his guiding principles were rather unusual for a defender of the working class, as "Iaponchik's army had its own 'moral' code. It did not touch—or as they say 'clip' ['*kalechat*']—doctors, lawyers, and artists. To rob or pillage people of these professions was the most supreme violation of this 'moral' code."[156]

Although Utesov's contradictory portrayal of Iaponchik could merely be an instance of the great entertainer's sardonic wit, it is equally plausible that Utesov is elliptically alluding to Iaponchik's Jewishness. A fear of blood may be a reference to the common Jewish stereotype of cowardice—a stereotype that often surfaces in anti-Semitic discourse and in self-deprecating Jewish humor. Iaponchik's protection (and perhaps admiration) of doctors, lawyers, and artists might be shorthand for his protection of Jews, given that all three are considered to be (and are statistically) common Jewish professions, and, moreover, evidence suggests that the real Mishka Iaponchik did in fact defend Odessa's Jews from pogroms.[157] Yet, ironically, the only time Utesov mentions pogroms in his memoirs is when he states that Iaponchik detested the White Army stationed in Odessa, so he sought "to organize a quiet pogrom against them."[158] Like most of the vignettes in his memoirs, Utesov's narrative of the life and bad times of Mishka Iaponchik is saturated with implicit Jewishness, and it emerges with the humor and inflections characteristic of the Yiddish culture that shaped the myth of old Odessa.

Implicit Jewishness can also be found in the writings of old Odessa's detractors. In his historical novel about the legendary Anarchist Grigorii Kotovskii, Boris Chetverikov depicts Iaponchik with allusions to his Jewish background, but they are rooted in a veiled anti-Semitism rather than Yiddish humor. Chetverikov's narrator insists that Iaponchik resembled a "gorilla," deploying a variation on the stereotype of the Jew's simian appearance.[159] His contempt for the gangsters comes out in full in an extended description of Iaponchik's regiment by one of the novel's protagonists:

> I don't trust them, not these people! There is hypocrisy in their eyes . . . such language emanates from them, such thieves' cant, and such incessant swearing and obscenities. . . . I know young healthy Russian people [*russkii narod*] [when I see them]. . . . But these . . . I don't even know

> what to call them . . . certainly not people. . . . They have no motherland, nothing is sacred to them.[160]

In such portrayals, the Odessit is marked as both Jew and thief, but he lacks the charm, humor, and other redeeming qualities that otherwise made him appealing to so many.

But even in such negative depictions there is still the common element of absurdity that seems to render the Jewish gangsters harmless, and, consequently, old Odessa's detractors often felt the need to explicitly underscore the danger Iaponchik and his fellow impish Odessans posed to the deadly serious proletarian Revolution. After Chetverikov's Kotovskii respectfully greets Iaponchik's regiment and welcomes the soldiers to the front, he looks with ridicule at "these 'little brothers' ['*bratishechki*'], the way they snigger [*khikhikiut'*], the way they exchange glances, the way Mishka Iaponchik paces before this formation of pickpockets, puffed up just like a turkey [*napyzhennyi, kak indiuk*]."[161] "It was impossible not to smile," writes Chetverikov, "seeing this masquerade. But it would not be a laughing matter for long."[162] Similarly, in a 1957 review of the play *Intervention, Znamia kommunizma* felt it necessary to stress the treachery of Filipp the Gangster: "Fil'ka is not inoffensive. . . . He is only funny in appearance, but in reality he is a dangerous enemy."[163]

And there was no place in the proletarian state for a dangerous enemy, for an unreformed Odessit who treated the Revolution as a game, as a chance to plunder and perform, much as he had under the old regime. Iaponchik was shot after his troops fled the front, and every depiction of the gangster produced during the post-Stalin era underscores his duplicity. Fedor Fomin, who clearly delighted in recounting Iaponchik's antics in Odessa, nevertheless maintains that "Iaponchik's perfidy cost us dearly: Petliura's men were able to penetrate deep into our position."[164] Even Leonid Utesov candidly denies Iaponchik's potential to become a loyal and effective Bolshevik:

> Such men who lack any sense of military duty, who do not know the meaning of labor, who are accustomed to leading parasitical lives, cannot be imbued with the mentality of those who fight for the future happiness of the people. It is completely incomprehensible to them. The men began to desert their regiment. They were magnetically drawn [back] to Odessa.[165]

And just as the Revolution destroyed the Jewish gangster in Babel's film *Benia Krik,* Iaponchik's escapades concluded with a bullet in the back of his head. "The inglorious history [*besslavnaia istoriia*] of Mishka Iaponchik has ended," write Lukin and Polianovskii.[166] Iaponchik's death symbolizes the end of old Odessa, and most other Odessits depicted during the post-Stalin era also perished (either

physically or symbolically) with the Revolution. They were incapable of enduring the decimation of their homeland.

In the film *The Golden Calf,* Ostap Bender—the last of the Odessans—dies a metaphorical death while attempting to flee the USSR by crossing into Romania, dreaming of making it to Rio de Janeiro, his envisioned surrogate city of sin, now that old Odessa is no more. The final scene has Bender ambling through the snow, with an awkward gait owing to the abundance of jewels, gold, and dollars that are practically bursting through his fur coat and tuxedo. Shots of Bender stumbling amid the frozen white emptiness of the steppe are combined with intertitles narrating his final struggle: a battle to live the decadent life that the Odessit has always believed to be the sine qua non of his existence:

> The Smooth Operator had been preparing all winter . . .
>
> He bought American dollars with portraits of presidents in white curls . . .
>
> golden watches . . .
>
> cigarette cases . . .
>
> wedding rings . . .
>
> diamonds . . .
>
> and other precious items
>
> His fur coat bending him to the ground
>
> Weighed down by gold—dishes, crosses, bracelets . . .
>
> His back itching from the watches
>
> All of this marvelous cargo . . .
>
> . . . was supposed to guarantee the commodore [*komandor*] . . .
>
> an easy, carefree [*bezalabernaia*] life on the shores of the warm ocean . . .
>
> in Rio de Janeiro

Bender approaches the Romanian border guards with a smile and a twinkle in his eyes, greeting them in a dozen different languages. But they shake his coat and his wealth comes tumbling out in a torrential flow. Bender refuses to go down without a fight, and, branding them all "exploiters of the toiling people," he swings wildly at them, brandishing bracelets, golden plates, and jewels as his weapons. It is a losing battle, however, and Bender wakes up in the snow, his tuxedo now in tatters, stripped of all his forbidden wealth, much as old Odessa had been drained of its deviant glitter with the triumph of Soviet power. But ever the performer, Bender turns to his imaginary audience to grandiloquently comment on his failure, contrasting himself to a more successful con artist from French literature:

There is no need for an ovation
I could not become the Count of Monte Cristo
I will have to qualify as a janitor
It's the end [waves his hand and laughs], the end.[167]

The Odessit could find a new home neither in the USSR nor abroad; he could not survive the Sovietization of his beloved city of rogues and schnorrers.

But there are exceptions to every rule, and the transformation of the Odessit was not an impossibility; it was just an unlikely occurrence. For Lev Sheinin's Admiral Nelson, the Revolution offered opportunities for an honest life that were worth pursuing. Nelson brags (like Bender, referring to himself in the third person) to his new friends in Soviet officialdom how "for the first time in his life 'Admiral Nelson' was on the side of the law. And I must say that being a detective is much more interesting! I give you my word as an old safecracker that these were the happiest twenty-four hours in my life."[168] Nelson subsequently "severed all ties with his past . . . [and moved] to Moscow where he . . . [worked] diligently as a chief mechanic in a metal-working co-operative."[169] The Odessit's rehabilitation was a success, as seen in Sheinin's final meeting with the former safecracker during the 1930s: "The years had done their work," Sheinin writes, "it was difficult to recognize the 'Admiral,' he had aged so in the interval. Yet somewhere deep in his only eye there glowed the spark I remembered from our first encounter."[170] The Odessit need not have perished with the Revolution, but the destruction of his city rendered his giddy, deviant, and ostentatious way of life an anachronism, inappropriate and largely impossible in a socialist state ideologically rooted in industry, toil, and proletarian morality.

Odessa within Proletarian Time and Space

Old Odessa was over, and the city of sin's proponents and detractors alike implied that the builders of socialism had obliterated its carnivalesque universe. Accordingly, the governing narrative of old Odessa was generally located in the past tense, in yesteryear; it was a land before proletarian time and space. But Odessa continued to exist as a physical city in the present, even if Gomorrah had been expunged from it. Moreover, as a resort town on the temperate shores of the Black Sea in proverbially frigid Russia, it remained, by definition, paradise on earth. Odessa still attracted visitors, both Soviet and foreign, and those who sought to sell the city needed to depict it as a heavenly space with neither iniquity nor frivolity. Some of old Odessa *had* to persist, even if its revamped image was a distortion of its former infamy.

Guidebooks produced during the post-Stalin era sought to market Sovietized Odessa as a divine southern seaport, a resplendent Garden of Eden where visitors

could be dazzled by its beauty and invigorated by its lushness. Odessa was billed as "the City of Smiles and Sunshine," located by "the Bluest Sea," as the chapter headings in Arkadii Gaivoron's *Odessa Says: Welcome* contend.[171] Another guidebook proudly boasts that

> nature has lavishly endowed this city by the Black Sea with gifts. A warm sea, estuaries with therapeutic mud baths and salt water lakes, clean air, filled with the smells of the sea and the steppe, all this creates propitious conditions for rejuvenation and relaxation. For 290 days of the year the sun shines generously and brightly high up in the sky over Odessa.[172]

As in bygone years, Odessa's profusion of delicacies overwhelmed the senses, with an "abundance of fruit and vegetables . . . [including] heaps of juicy purple-red tomatoes, amber grapes, enormous watermelons, and sugary-sweet orange colored melons."[173] And, as a seaport, Odessa was still a city of exotic people, a multinational deluge of humanity. "If you take a stroll along the piers of this port today," writes Gaivoron, "you will find ships with numerous and different flags. Taking into mind [*sic*] that every foreign ship represents the territory of its country, you will be able to visit practically all the countries of the world without leaving Odessa!"[174] Soviet Odessa was still a gilded city but one of abundance without contraband, commerce without swindlers, and a curative environment without empowering frivolity.

The building of socialism negated old Odessa by eliminating the need for the shady characters along with the taverns, flophouses, and brothels they had called their home. Gaivoron maintains that "in pre-revolutionary times Odessa was always attracted by thousands of vagabons [*sic*] who were searching for work in the port. Where are the famous vagabonds of Odessa to-day [*sic*]? Now practically all the cargo handling operations are mechanized."[175] Enduring a similar fate was

> one of old Odessa's "objects of note" ["*dostoprimechatel'nosti*"]—the bar "Gambrinus" which Kuprin depicted with talent and in such detail in one of his stories. Dockers and sailors came here to hear the sad music of Sashka the Fiddler. But today there is no need for such "Gambrinuses" in cellars, since there are now bright, open, and well-equipped cafés all over the city.[176]

Old Odessa may have once been called a "utopia," Gaivoron concludes, "but such utopias could never actually be realized under capitalism."[177] Old Odessa was over, and what remained was a lush, balmy and pleasure-drenched paradise but one devoid of the roguish Odessit and his sardonic machinations.

But the proletarian state was no monolith, and it could hardly conquer the roguish mind of every Odessit, since every Odessit was, by definition, a rogue.

Behind the smiles in the land of sunshine there occasionally lurked an authentic Odessit, a chiseler who could still manipulate the Soviet system, long after Mishka Iaponchik had been shot, Admiral Nelson had become a mechanic, and Ostap Bender had qualified as a janitor. In September 1973 *Vecherniaia Odessa*'s "Antilopa-gnu" "uncovered" the intrigues of a crafty merchant at the market who was fleecing his customers with inaccurately labeled cuts of meat. Skimming from the edges was hardly an uncommon offense in the corrupt shadow economy of the USSR during the postwar era, but the Odessit, in the tradition of his forerunners, came up with a uniquely Odessan defense, challenging the very principles of science. "Antilopa-gnu" reported the incident with typical Odessan irony:

> The Buyer's Remorse Advertisement Agency: Not One Gram without a Scam (*Ni gramma bez obmana*)
>
> "How much does a kilogram cost?"
>
> Just don't raise the issue with those experienced people who have bought meat at the New Market from M. P. Gilerman. They all know now that there are not 1,000 grams in a kilogram but actually 916.8.
>
> Gilerman has unilaterally come to the conclusion that Mendeleev got the weight of iron wrong in his periodic table, and he has corrected his scale accordingly.
>
> Gilerman publicly defended his discovery in Odessa's People's Court recently. He was sentenced to fourteen months in prison for encroaching upon the authority of the author of the periodic table and for shortchanging his customers.[178]

Like the traditional schnorrer who manipulates Judaic law to achieve his material ends, the Odessit unabashedly misuses science to justify his swindling. Ostap Bender's progeny continued to subsist in this former city of rogues and schnorrers, largely incapacitated by the Soviet system but still able to practice some of his shenanigans among the living.

The continuing escapades of Odessa's surviving swindlers also appear in one of Zhvanetskii's most popular sketches from the 1970s, "How They Joke in Odessa" ("Kak shutiat v Odesse").[179] The piece depicts a group of scheming musicians who show up at an apartment to convince its dweller that he hired them to play at a funeral, when in fact nobody has died and no such arrangements were ever made. The musical troop is marked as characteristically Odessan (and Jewish) by their linguistic manipulation, street slang, complaints about their own suffering, and readiness to use their fists to settle disputes. The trombonist, for instance, avows that "if something doesn't happen soon, we'll smash this joint to pieces. I'm an invalid, you know" ("tut budet chto-nibud', ili my raznesem etu khalabudu vdrebezgi popolam. Ia invalid, vy zhe znaete").[180] The piece's title is an obvious

nod to Babel's "How Things Were Done in Odessa" ("Kak eto delalos' v Odesse"), one of his paradigmatic gangster tales. But unlike Babel's tale, Zhvanetskii's takes place in the present ("How They Joke . . . ," rather than "How They Joked . . ."), suggesting that not all of Odessa's deviant musicians had been extricated from the streets and reeducated for the conservatory. Yet they are a dying breed, an isolated group that no longer has taverns to inhabit and gangsters to serenade. And perhaps most fitting, they play for (imaginary) funerals rather than the decadent weddings of former times. When Odessa was old it was an enchanted realm of dissipated possibility; now the dissipated are residual itinerants, still fueled by spectacle, humor, and artifice but with ever diminishing opportunities to ply their trade.

The sporadic public surfacing of Odessa's vestigial swindlers in the proletarian present was often complemented by the eruption of their bawdy music, the criminal folksongs that had been relegated underground to the domain of private concerts and the *magnitizdat.* In a column from January 1975, "Antilopa-gnu" celebrated the arrival of what it called "sound letters" (*zvukovoe pis´mo*), musical envelopes that play classic Odessan songs, with the article quoting verse from "Bagels," "Miasoedovskaia Street," and "A Tavern Opened on Deribasovskaia Street" ("Na Deribasovkoi otkrylas' pivnaia").[181] The piece was titled, in huge bold typeface, "Do You Want Songs?" ("Vy khochete pesen?"), a grammatically flawed title of another criminal folksong, one that had become a slogan embraced by Odessans as distinctively their own, and a prime example of how a terse idiomatic phrase could encapsulate the soul of old Odessa. The authors of the article proudly boasted that these musical envelopes were being distributed throughout the cities of the USSR and are, in fact, the greatest souvenirs one can get from Odessa. Odessa's street songs had not been silenced, but just as the Odessit could now only surface intermittently in doorways and market stalls, his beloved music was confined to mailboxes and packages. Old Odessa had not been crushed, but it had shrunk. The sinful waters of Eldorado still flowed into the Black Sea during the post-Stalin era, even if it was no longer the torrential deluge it had been during its imagined golden age.

Forbidden Nostalgia

In a sentimental article from February 1967 *Znamia kommunizma*'s Karp Polubakov nostalgically ruminated on the defunct subterranean tavern Gambrinus.[182] Polubakov called for its revival—not necessarily as a bar but as a theater or a gathering place for Odessans or even as the set for a television variety show. For Polubakov, Gambrinus symbolized the essence of old Odessa—its criminality, its humor, its merriment, and its Jewishness. Gambrinus was never (and could never have been) reopened in Soviet times because old Odessa was over, and its physical revival was constrained by the realities of politics and cultural

life in the USSR. Yet Polubakov was, in fact, playing a critical role in keeping old Odessa alive—by writing about it, commemorating it, yearning for it. Old Odessa had been branded the antithesis of Soviet culture, and this meant that it *had* to be portrayed as something that was no longer there, that even whispering its name was potentially crossing the boundary of the permissible. Whether or not Polubakov realized it, his terse statement of nostalgia was an act of inscribing his own voice into the Odessa myth; in saying old Odessa was over, he was keeping it alive.

Other mythmakers, however, understood that the commemoration of old Odessa—through snippets of dialogue, passing references to certain songs, and allusions to folkloric motifs—could only occur with subtlety, irony, and delicate word play. [Konstantin Paustovskii and Leonid Utesov were well aware of the precarious place old Odessa sustained in postwar Soviet culture, and, in the true Odessan spirit, they mischievously played with this in their writings: distancing themselves from the city's deviance while simultaneously revealing its primacy in their identities. In one illuminating passage, Paustovskii describes his work as a newspaper editor in Odessa and how he was compelled to substantially "rewrite nearly half of the articles to rid them of their ineradicable Odessa-Moldavankan style [*neistrebimyi odessko-moldavanskii stil'*]."[183] Apparently Paustovskii could not efface what had been deemed "ineradicable," as the Odessa portion of his memoirs is replete with the Yiddishisms, the criminal slang, and the bawdy music that had flourished in the Moldavanka. He was, paradoxically, claiming to have played a role in dismantling old Odessa (for old Odessa had been built upon the Moldavanka's "style") while at the same time reconstructing it for his postwar audience. Utesov's memoirs are similar in this ironic duality—the ridicule and rejection of old Odessa for its frivolity coupled with a sentimental admiration for its magic. "Ah, nostalgia is such an illness," concludes Utesov, "what a beautiful illness. There is no medicine for it! And thank God there isn't."[184]

CHAPTER 5 *Rewriting Old Odessa's Mythical Past*

In 1986 the Soviet filmmaker Vladimir Alenikov received tentative permission to produce a television mini-series based on Isaac Babel's *Odessa Stories;* Babel's irreverent Jewish gangsters had not appeared on screen since the silent movie *Benia Krik* was withdrawn from circulation nearly six decades earlier. But as the year wore on and Alenikov heard nothing further from the studio, he asked the editor-in-chief for an explanation. The ensuing exchange between the editor and the director captures the uncertainty of the early days of Glasnost and Perestroika, when Gorbachev's government was cautiously laying the foundation for political and cultural reform in the USSR. Alenikov describes the exchange:

> [The editor] lowered his voice and confidentially told me: "Vlad, you are a talented person, and we understand that you'd produce a good film. But understand our position—how could we allow it? Look at who all these characters are!"
>
> "What are you talking about?"
>
> "All of your characters—they're all Jewish!"
>
> "Uh, first of all, they're not mine, they're Babel's. And second, what's the issue?"
>
> "What do you mean, 'what?' We cannot possibly . . . but we've come up with an idea that's really not that bad . . ."
>
> "Not that bad?"
>
> "You can change all the characters' nationality, and then we will immediately allow—"
>
> "What are you joking?"
>
> "No, we're not joking. Look, where do they live? In the Moldavanka? Just make them all Moldovan."[1]

Alenikov's script remained shelved until 1989, when it was finally released as the film *The Carter and the King* (*Bindiuzhnik i korol'*), a musical romp featuring unmistakably Jewish gangsters whose criminality intersected with their apparent piety. *The Carter and the King* is emblematic of old Odessa's renaissance during the late Soviet era and the ultimate triumph of the Jewish city of sin over the proletarian

morality that had vilified its frivolity and constrained its celebration for more than half a century.

As the communist system degenerated and disintegrated, the myth of old Odessa blossomed. The reduction of censorship during the late 1980s, followed by its virtual elimination in the 1990s, led to an unprecedented production of mythmaking material and the unrestricted public celebration of the city's deviant history. Most of the legends and lore of old Odessa's swindlers and merrymakers that circulated during the myth's resurgence were not new; in content and in spirit the stories, folksongs, jokes, and films treaded on familiar terrain. What was new was the myth's explicitness: no longer was there a need to use subtlety in ascribing Jewishness to the Odessit, to have the impish charlatan hide behind a Moldovan identity or to proclaim his improbable descent from a Turkish Janissary. And the demise of the USSR empowered the myth of old Odessa with a sense of permanence: much of what had been an oral and anonymous culture under communism was now given a tangible durability, not only in the form of legally published and widely disseminated books, journals, and musical recordings but also in the form of monuments, theaters, annual festivals, taverns, and cafés dedicated to commemorating the city's sin and revelry of bygone years. The danger of impending destruction has dissipated, and the tales of old Odessa are now enshrined throughout the city in brick, iron, and stone.

Like most cities in the former Soviet Union, Odessa has gone through fundamental changes since the late 1980s, including the mass emigration of its Jewish population to America, Europe, and Israel. But the dispersion of Odessa's Jews has paradoxically reinforced the city's identity as a Judeo-kleptocracy; the Internet, the freedom to travel, and a tenacious diaspora unwilling to sever ties with its beloved historic homeland have all colluded to intensify its celebration through humor and nostalgia. The production, diffusion, and consumption of the Odessa myth is now an international phenomenon, with metropole and periphery engaged in a symbiotic, nurturing relationship that was previously impossible. As the imagined golden age of old Odessa continues to recede into the realm of collective memory, its visibility in the present continues to increase. The fabled Odessit survived the twentieth century and the Revolution that sought to destroy him, and he still thrives in folklore, music, and humor exchanged across the globe today.

A New Beginning for Old Odessa

The ascension to power of Mikhail Gorbachev and his inauguration of Glasnost and Perestroika marked a pivotal moment in the evolution of the Odessa myth. Glasnost meant openness, and openness signified a diminution of state control over what could be said, printed, and performed. With fits and starts, the boundaries of the permissible gradually expanded from 1986 onward.[2] There was

now room for the Odessa myth to proliferate publicly in a way that had not been possible since the 1920s. And just as the veteran mythmakers of the 1920s had been instrumental in reviving the Odessa myth after Stalin's death, their successors spearheaded its resurgence during the Gorbachev era. Leonid Utesov died in 1982, but his vacated post as the preeminent Odessit was quickly filled by others, including Mikhail Zhvanetskii, Valerii Khait, Karp Polubakov, and Semen Livshin, all of whom had gotten their start by performing in Odessa's theaters and writing satirical columns in Odessa's newspapers during the 1960s. They had the experience, the talent, and the desire to elevate the myth of old Odessa to the center of Soviet cultural life and their city's professed identity.

Odessa's inhabitants prided themselves on their humor, and it was through the public exhibition of their wit that the myth's late Soviet renaissance began. The year 1986 saw the return of KVN, the Club of the Merry and Resourceful (*Klub veselykh i nakhodchivykh*) as well as the unofficial revival of the Day of Humor (*Iumorina*), which had been canceled a decade earlier after severe criticism from party officials. Odessa's local newspaper, *Vecherniaia Odessa,* resumed its role as the self-proclaimed mouthpiece of laughter and irreverence with its satirical columns and the celebration of the city's flare for merriment. But the public revival of the Odessa myth began cautiously, much as the Gorbachev government plodded along the tortuous path of reform. On March 31, 1986, a short column tersely announced that April 1 would be (and has always been) the "day of laughter" (*den´ smekha*), whose highlights would include the screening of footage from the *Iumorina* of 1976 and a handful of stage performances; it was a relatively quiet affair, reported with little fanfare.[3] These were still the early days of Perestroika, before the Chernobyl disaster catalyzed the pace of reform, before the regime fully committed itself to eliminating censorship, and before Odessa's mythmakers felt bold enough to resurrect *all* of old Odessa, confident that the era of stagnation had, in fact, come to an end.

But Odessa's humorists had been galvanized into action, and they sought to mobilize their city, whose mirthful reputation was its badge of honor. As Glasnost expanded in scope, Odessa's annual Day of Humor burgeoned dramatically, eventually transforming the city's streets into the carnivalesque universe emblematic of old Odessa. "The Day of Humor continues," declared *Vecherniaia Odessa* on March 2, 1987, pointing out that the holiday's official return after a painful ten-year absence could realistically be doubted by even the city's greatest optimists, such as Zhvanetskii, Kartsev, and Livshin. Yet they believed in its imminence and in its permanence, certain that the festivities "will keep returning to our city every April 1."[4] Odessa was reasserting its identity and wanted everybody to know it.

And if there remained any doubt, the local press refuted it the following year, when practically the entire April 1, 1988, issue of *Vecherniaia Odessa* was dedicated to the Day of Humor.[5] Gone were the usual reports on Soviet agricultural achievements; the gravity of building socialism gave way to the levity of old Odessa's

imagined golden age. The newspaper's editors sought to demonstrate that this was not merely a temporary suspension of reality but rather the beginning of a return to Odessa's normalcy. "When you open up today's issue of *Vecherniaia Odessa,*" declared the opening article, "do not be surprised. This is the USUAL April 1 edition."[6] "Humor is our city's property," and Odessans must do everything to defend it and perpetuate its presence.[7] The various contributors extolled Odessa's sardonic heroes past and present, such as Babel and Zhvanetskii, and, for the first time in more than six decades, a "dictionary of 'the Odessan' language" appeared in print, one that proudly boasted of the Odessit's proclivity for mangling Russian grammar.[8] The momentum engendered by 1988's Day of Humor ensured that the festivities would continue to grow in subsequent years; as socialism withered away, laughter in Odessa swelled. In 1989 *Vecherniaia Odessa* heralded the upcoming *Iumorina* already at the beginning of February, even providing a map of the city's downtown area with all the anticipated sites of merrymaking marked off with starbursts.[9] In 1990, April 1 ceased to be a paltry twenty-four hours long: the Day of Laughter became the Days of Laughter, running from March 30 to April 1.[10] Carnival supplanted communism as the governing ideology, and the jokers deposed the proletariat as the city's foremost citizens.

And perhaps it is fitting that on January 1, 1991, the first day of the final year of the Soviet Union's existence, the city's mythmakers launched *Akh Odessa!,* a periodical exclusively dedicated to humor and the celebration of old Odessa. Graced with a banner in various languages—including Yiddish—that affirmed the centrality of laughter for a healthy life, *Akh Odessa!* was replete with anecdotes, limericks, lyrics to criminal folksongs, and satirical takes on contemporary politics. Karp Polubakov, who had done much to keep the spirit of old Odessa alive during the 1960s, provided the opening piece of the inaugural issue, cheerfully declaring:

> The dream of Odessa's satirists and humorists has been realized. Our lives of suffering as poor subletters, taking shelter in the crowded communal corners of satire and humor on the last pages in leading and guiding newspapers have ended.[11]

The Soviet state had rescinded its monopoly on journalism, and Odessans responded by propagating the wit that had dominated the city's prerevolutionary publications, most notably *Odessakaia pochta* and *Krokodil.* By 1991 the ideological hurdles that had hindered the myth's revival had all but vanished.

The attenuation of censorship allowed the myth of old Odessa to proliferate and circulate through other media besides the local press and the much revered annual street festivals. Film continued to be an important genre exploited by Odessa's mythmakers, but unlike the movies produced during the Brezhnev era, in which old Odessa's criminality and Jewishness remained implicit and of secondary significance, the new films abandoned the subtlety of their predecessors. Isaac

Babel's gangsters were fully rehabilitated, appearing in three films within the Jewish milieu that Babel had originally envisaged.[12] Other archetypal Odessans also surfaced on the silver screen, including Mishka Iaponchik, Aleksandr Kuprin's Sashka the Fiddler, and Il'f and Petrov's Ostap Bender.[13] Guns, Rabbis, and wild music harmoniously coexist in many of these films, leaving little doubt that Odessa was once a city of dissolute Jewish rogues who thrived on their chaotic surroundings.

Film was not the only familiar genre to flourish with renewed vigor during the Soviet Union's final days and in the years following its collapse. Volumes of memoirs, fiction, and poetry commemorating old Odessa appeared in quantities that eclipsed their Soviet-era precursors many times over. Many of the actors and stage performers of the post-Stalin period now used the memoir to perpetuate their roles as mythmakers. Zhvanetskii's erstwhile partner in comedy, Roman Kartsev, documented his adventurous life as an Odessit, as did Boris Sichkin, the actor who had brought the fictional trickster and performer Buba Kastorskii to life in the 1960s in several otherwise serious movies about the civil war.[14] Although he was born in Kiev, Sichkin titled his memoirs *I am from Odessa, Greetings . . .* (*Ia iz Odessy, zdras´te . . .*), which was Kastorskii's endlessly repeated motto, his way of defining himself as a charlatan from the city of sin. And in the tradition of mythmaking, Sichkin's account of his life is a convoluted mixture of fact and outrageously fanciful fiction, boasting how he grew up between a Jewish bazaar and a colony of young criminals, took shelter in a gypsy encampment after being expelled from school, and housed thieves and murderers in his family's attic.[15] Much as Utesov had earlier done (with far greater subtlety) in his writings, Sichkin and his fellow memoirists portrayed the archetypal Odessit as gangster, Jew, and artist, a tradition dating back to the nineteenth century.

The end of censorship allowed filmmakers and memoirists to sensationalize old Odessa in a manner previously possible solely through anecdotes and criminal folksongs—oral and transitory genres of mythmaking that defied outright suppression by the authorities. Glasnost signified the end of the subversive potency of the anecdote and the folksong, but neither genre has vanished from the expanding realm of mythmaking. From the late 1980s onward Odessan anecdotes and criminal folksongs have been published in numerous collected volumes; satirical columns in newspapers have printed long-forgotten jokes from the prerevolutionary period; dictionaries of the "Odessa language" have been compiled; local pundits have tried to trace the origins of Odessa's anonymous lore and determine authorship; and the criminal folksongs recorded by Arkadii Severnyi and Vladimir Vysotskii can now be purchased on compact disc on street corners and in music stores. The most lurid and frivolous incarnations of the Odessa myth now enjoy *physical* durability, as nobody is impeding their production and dissemination.[16]

Old Odessa has become more tangible in other ways as well. Since the mid-1990s monuments commemorating the city's greatest mythmakers and the fabled

characters they created have been erected in the downtown area. On the grounds of Odessa's literature museum there are now statues of Zhvanetskii, Sashka the Fiddler, and the iconic "Rabinovich," the generic Jew made famous in Soviet anecdotes. In the city's central garden, there are monuments paying homage to two of the greatest Odessans, one real and one fictional: at one end is a life-sized bronze effigy of Leonid Utesov, sitting on a bench with open arms, inviting passersby to sit and be photographed with him; and at the other end stands Il'f and Petrov's coveted "Twelfth Chair." With quotations from the classic book engraved on its surface, the Twelfth Chair stands by itself, without an occupant, perhaps suggesting that Ostap Bender may yet return to Odessa to seek the wealth of Eldorado which he considers rightfully his own.[17]

Old Odessa can also be "found" in the bars, taverns, and restaurants once frequented by Mishka Iaponchik and the city's other prerevolutionary rogues, including the subterranean Gambrinus and the posh Café Fankoni, which have both reopened since Perestroika. They may not be in the exact same locations as their predecessors, but they bear their names and seek to re-create the festive atmosphere of old Odessa. Gambrinus features a Jewish fiddler of diminutive stature who performs criminal folksongs nightly, much as Kuprin's Sashka did.[18] And even though Mishka Iaponchik and his bandits no longer hold court in the Moldavanka, sightseers can sign up for a minibus tour of the city's infamous underworld and gaze upon the streets made famous by Babel and others.[19] The myth of old Odessa is now prominently on display, and those seeking to partake in its commemoration can, literally, immerse themselves in it.

Since the late 1980s the Odessa myth has also burgeoned at the international level. The city's diaspora has grown exponentially, largely a result of the massive outflow of its Jews, who numbered fewer than fifty thousand by the 1990s and as few as twenty thousand by the early twenty-first century, a mere remnant of a once mighty community.[20] To be sure, Odessans have been leaving their beloved city and commemorating it from abroad for well over a century. The Zionist émigrés who went to Palestine during the first decade of the twentieth century tried to establish an "Odessa in Palestine";[21] Vladimir Jabotinsky first published his semi-autobiographical novel, *The Five,* in Paris in 1936; and New York's Brighton Beach region had been dubbed "Little Odessa" before the mass exodus of Soviet Jewry began during the Soviet Union's twilight years. But in terms of sheer numbers, more former Odessans dwell in the United States and Israel than ever before, with Brighton Beach becoming, in many respects, the epicenter of Odessa abroad.[22] One British traveler to "Little Odessa" in 2003 insisted that,

> Brighton Beach is known as Little Odessa because it is by the seaside and chock-full of Russian émigrés, who came here in waves over the last century. Coming upon this Brooklyn outpost is like arriving at a

> Black sea resort with strong strands of yankee-doodle and Jewish culture thrown in.[23]

Odessa's émigrés may have rejected many aspects of their former lives in the Soviet Union, but the spirit of their gilded city could not be forgotten.

There is a fundamental difference, however, in the way old Odessa is being transnationally commemorated today compared to earlier times, for Odessa's diaspora has retained strong ties with its historic homeland. Mythmaking is now a collaborative process, uniting those who left with those who have stayed behind. Mikhail Zhvanetskii has played the leading role in transforming old Odessa into an intercontinental entity, having founded the "Worldwide Club of Odessans" (*Vsemirnyi klub odessitov*) in 1990, and having served as the club's president for its entire history. In his inaugural address, Zhvanetskii contended that,

> after having traveled I realized how far and wide Odessa has been spread out—from America to Australia. But Odessa's children have not forgotten their city. They remember it. . . . Odessa lives and we cannot allow it to be wrecked. . . . Odessa was and will remain one of the most celebrated cities, and it remains for us to live and live. . . . To our health! Tfu, tfu, tfu.[24]

Despite the seeming novelty of an international club of Odessans, its leaders insist that this is merely a natural development in the city's historical trajectory:

> Two hundred odd years ago people from all corners of the earth—from Russia and Greece, from France and Italy, came together on the Black Sea steppe in order to build a European city. From its very beginning, Odessa has been a city of immigrants. And now it is a city of emigrants, as there is no continent in this world without people who were born amidst Odessa's fragrant acacias. Ask any one of them, whether he lives in New York or Moscow, Sydney or Munich, who he is, and without fail you will hear "I—am an Odessit!"[25]

Lampooning the now outmoded rhetoric of communism, the club calls upon "Odessans of the world [to] unite" (*Odessity vsekh stran soediniaites'*) and has played an active role in bringing its constituency together: through its newspaper, *The Worldwide Odessan News* (*Vsemirnye odesskie novosti*), its numerous other publications, and its interactive website, which invites visitors to participate in honoring the city's history and culture.[26]

Open borders and emigration have abetted the symbiotic relationship between Odessans and the city's expatriates, but the intensity, richness, and accessibility of the culture they have produced would not be possible without the technological innovations of the post-Soviet era. The Internet has provided a home for what may be (and has been) called "Virtual Odessa," with dozens of websites offering pages of

Odessan lore, including biographies of famous Odessans, recipes for "traditional" Odessan dishes, dictionaries of the Odessan language, anecdotes, and recordings of Odessa's most famous songs. These websites are intended to provide prospective visitors and curious foreigners with useful information about the city, as well as a de-centered site for the celebration of Odessa's culture. Through the Internet, Odessa's mythmakers have sought to fortify the city's identity and strengthen the bonds that unite its citizenry across the globe.[27]

The creation of transcontinental cultural communities in the Internet age—communities that unite homelands and diasporas, metropoles and peripheries, religious clerics and disciples—is a common phenomenon, hardly unique to Odessa. But what is distinctive in Odessa's case is the desire of its mythmakers to define "Odessa-Mama" as a Jewish city of sin or, to put it more accurately, to reinforce the belief that Odessa has always been a Jewish city of sin. Odessa's contemporary mythmakers are selling their city's charlatanism to foreigners, confident that there is an international market for these tales of deviant Jews and gangsters. The 2005 inaugural issue of *Edges of Odessa,* an English-language magazine intended "for our guests," illustrates post-Soviet Odessa's paradoxical quest for refinement and civility through the promotion of criminality. Although only one out of its ten pages is devoted to an interview with Odessa's mayor, in which he avows that "Odessa will become one of the most respectable European cities," *Edges of Odessa* devotes four full pages to an article on the life and fate of Mishka Iaponchik, who is dubbed "Odessa's 'Robin Hood.'"[28] The city's leadership wants its visitors to appreciate Odessa's notorious heritage, to understand why this town has always been different from all the rest.

The political, ideological, and technological impediments that previously restricted the production and dissemination of the Odessa myth are now gone. People around the world can freely celebrate the Judeo-kleptocracy by the Black Sea, whether they are in Odessa, Israel, New York, or Canada. Nobody is trying to vilify or extinguish the city's sordid collective memory. And Odessa's present-day mythmakers are rewriting the city's imagined past in an effort to undo the alleged damage wrought by the Soviet state, the builders of socialism who attempted to snuff out old Odessa in its many incarnations.

Rehabilitating Historical Infamy

By late 1987 Gorbachev and his reformers began to stress the inextricable link between Perestroika and the need to reexamine Russian and Soviet history with greater honesty. On the seventieth anniversary of the Revolution, Gorbachev declared:

> It is essential to assess the past with a sense of historical responsibility and on the basis of the historical truth. This must be done, firstly, because of

> the tremendous importance of those years for the future of our country, for the future of socialism, . . . and to draw lessons from mistakes and miscalculations. . . . There are still attempts to turn away from painful matters in our history, to hush them up, and to make believe that nothing special happened. . . . Why we cannot agree to this is that a truthful analysis must help us to solve today's problems of democratization, legality, openness, overcoming bureaucracy, in short, the vital problems of perestroika.[29]

Scholars in the USSR began to engage in what Alec Nove has called "the rehabilitation of history," a quest to fill in the blank spots of the Soviet past, particularly the devastating and tragic events of the Stalin era and the Second World War.[30] Rewriting history became a key element of Glasnost, as the Gorbachev regime had come to believe that the transformation of the USSR would not be possible without a candid assessment of the mistakes and crimes in its turbulent past.

The rehabilitation of the past had a direct impact on the myth of old Odessa and its place in the annals of the city's history. The myth's inseparable amalgamation of Jewishness, criminality, and humor assumed center stage in the city's reconstructed historical narrative, precisely because the discarded socialist narrative had denied its significance. In many respects, the myth of old Odessa *became* the city's history, and Odessa's mythmakers became its leading historians. Although driven by a desire to fill in the blank spots of history like their counterparts in Moscow, they were not so much concerned with the vilification of Stalin for his heinous crimes as with the celebration of the Jewish gangster for his frivolous transgressions. Rewriting Odessa's mythical past lacked the solemnity characteristic of history writing during this era, for it was undertaken with humor and irony. It *had* to be done with humor and irony because old Odessa was intrinsically funny, and to downplay its humor would be to admit its defeat by Soviet Communism, or—far worse—to imply that there had never been a place called old Odessa.

The transformation of the Odessa myth into the city's canonical history has not entailed a sober attempt to separate fact from fantasy on the part of the mythmakers. Their goal is to make their audience imagine old Odessa as having historically been a Jewish city of sin. One book, which claims to be an archival-based history of Odessa's underworld makes liberal use of Soviet-era memoirs and Babel's *Odessa Stories* to embellish Iaponchik's escapades, even suggesting at one point that the gangster was known as Benia Krik during his lifetime.[31] The myth of old Odessa is now the city's history because it has been fully rehabilitated, not because it is an accurate representation of the past; it has 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.

It is hardly surprising that Odessa's humorists, including stage performers and writers of satirical columns, have been at the forefront of rewriting Odessa's past.

There can be no place for tragedy in Odessa's history, maintain Valentin Krapiva, Oleg Kudrin and Vsevolod Liumkis—three former members of KVN who now write "history"—because "tragedy was transformed into farce from Odessa's very beginnings.[32] Krapiva and his collaborators further explain the grave necessity of their task by ridiculing extant histories of Odessa:

> In starting this project, we, of course, went to the library, but we realized that we had made a big mistake. What we found there filled us with horror! We discovered heaps of extremely serious, dusty, and profound historical investigations. But the voice within all of us suggested that Odessa could not have had such a serious history. Such a serious history for such a not-so-serious city.[33]

And it is this need to ridicule that has prompted the former KVNers to begin their narrative with a full page dedicated to "the influence of the Aztecs on Odessa's history." "According to the latest historical data," they tersely conclude, "the Aztecs, who lived in Central America, had no influence on the history of Odessa whatsoever. And what a shame!" The inclusion (or rather the explicit exclusion) of the Aztecs in their work might merely be an instance of the flippant humor they see as the foundational building block of old Odessa. But perhaps the veteran satirists are subtly critiquing those dusty Soviet-era history books, whose grave narrative of revolution and class struggle—entirely devoid of Jewish gangsters, fiddlers, and contraband—is as irrelevant for understanding Odessa's history as are the Aztecs.[34]

Criminality is at the core of Odessa's rewritten past, and the new historians have humorously tied it to the city's very origins, suggesting that the Odessit has always been a rogue and his environment has always been infused with the spirit transgression. As Krapiva, Kudrin, and Liumkis contend:

> On August 18, 1798 at two PM, Odessa's first custom house was opened.
>
> One hour later, on August 18, 1798 at three PM, Odessa's first contraband arrived.
>
> One hour later, on August 18, 1798 at four PM, customs officials and smugglers came to an arrangement.
>
> All the treaties of tsarist Russia have sunk into oblivion but this great, powerful, and self-interested union created by the will of the people lives on and lets others live.[35]

Fleecing and swindling penetrated every layer of old Odessa's nascent society, even pervading the elite circle of tsarist aristocrats who had settled there. In a piece titled "The Criminalization of Odessa" ("Moshennizatsiia Odessy"), Oleg Gubar' describes how Odessa's first governor, the Duke de Richelieu, got acquainted with

the mores of his most eminent subjects through an act of theft upon his arrival in Odessa in 1803:

> When Richelieu first came to Odessa and was still unfamiliar with the local customs he called a meeting of the local "elite." Being a punctual person, the Duke habitually placed his watch by his side. While the meeting was in progress, the lights suddenly went out, the candelabrum on the table having been unexpectedly extinguished. When the candles were relit, it became apparent that the Duke's watch had disappeared. Perplexed by such a turn of events, Richelieu said: "Gentlemen, I am prepared to think that either one of you is playing a joke or has experienced a lapse in his judgment. I'm going to extinguish the candles, and, when I relight them, the watch will be back in its proper place." There was then a brief pause in the darkness, and, not only had the watch failed to materialize, it was impossible to light up the room: someone had stolen the candelabrum.[36]

In another vignette Gubar' recounts an incident from the mid-1860s, when

> the city Duma urgently debated whether or not to remove the most unbridled transgressors of public order from the Southern Palmyra to an indeterminate distance beyond the city's boundaries. One local newspaper responded to this proposal: "If it would be possible to evict ALL thieves and swindlers from Odessa, then the city would become considerably deserted."[37]

Fighting crime would have been a losing battle, and both the citizenry of old Odessa and their latter-day historians affirmed this fact with irony and pride.

The city's port and subterranean catacombs may have facilitated smuggling, but Odessa's multitalented and sharp-witted outlaws made forgery its preeminent industry. Krapiva, Kudrin, and Liumkis insist that Odessa's greatest artists have historically been the designers of Odessan currency, but unlike most painters and sculptors who autograph their own moniker on their work, Odessa's artists have tended to imprint "the family name of the State Bank's manager" on their masterpieces.[38] Although counterfeiters are supposed to produce replicas that are indistinguishable from the originals, Odessa's most gifted artists always embellished their handiwork with a personal touch, such as Ivan Iogannovich Fedorov-Gutenberg, whose twenty-five-ruble note gave Tsar Alexander III "a nose, eyes, and, in particular, a beard that remarkably reminded one of Reb Tsvi-Gersh," the Rabbi of a local synagogue. Fedorov-Gutenberg was eventually arrested, but his ingenuity ultimately saved him, as he paid his fine using currency "with the touching inscription 'in commemoration of the fair sentence of June 10, 1902.'" "Indeed," conclude Krapiva and his coauthors, "he was a veritable [*nastoiashchii*] Odessit!"[39]

To have been a veritable Odessit historically, one had to have been a criminal. Accordingly, Odessa's post-Soviet mythmakers have investigated, documented, and celebrated the cornucopia of bandits, thieves, prostitutes, smugglers, and gangsters who submerged the city in oceans of delinquency. Anatolii Barbakaru (a self-professed cardsharp) has written many books on Odessa's underworld, as has Viktor Faitel'berg-Blank, a professor of medicine turned historian whose epic series *The Bandits of Odessa* (*Banditskaia Odessa*) currently runs six volumes, tracing the city's criminals from their origins to the present day.[40] Infamous crooks from the nineteenth century that had, for all intents and purposes, vanished from the realm of mythmaking during the Soviet era have now returned, most notably Son'ka Zolotaia Ruchka, the nom de guerre of Sof'ia Bliuvshtein, who allegedly created a network of bandits across the Russian Empire and even Europe.[41] According to Faitel'berg-Blank, Son'ka Zolotaia Ruchka "did not merely rob; she also helped the wretched, the unlucky, the indigent, the tramps, and the migrants. . . . She particularly assisted Odessa's Jewish inhabitants."[42] "When she would get married (and she was constantly getting married)," write Krapiva, Kudrin, and Liumkis, "she would ride in a carriage along Deribasovskaia Street and would invariably distribute gold coins from her own hands."[43] "Old-timers in Odessa," they conclude, "always spoke of her with warmth: 'Son'ka not only had a golden hand, but also, thank God, a golden heart.'"[44] Son'ka has been elevated to the pinnacle of Odessa's underworld, the benevolent matriarch of her deviant city.

And given the historical intersection of Jewishness and criminality in the myth of old Odessa, their inseparable relationship has received increased emphasis by post-Soviet mythmakers. The understated markers of Jewish criminality that were dexterously used by Il'f and Petrov and Leonid Utesov have been cast off in favor of a transparency not seen in Soviet films and other published media since the 1920s. Whereas Babel and Utesov used Yiddishisms sparingly in depicting their gangsters, post-Soviet mythmakers have their characters speak in a language that is a genuine hybrid of Russian, Yiddish, and thieves' cant. "Maybe your *gonefs* want liquor *mide* humus [*Mozhet tvoi gonyfy khochut liker mide khumus, a?*]," asks one Odessan to another in a novel by Valerii Smirnov, which is set in old Odessa's "golden era," during the apex of Mishka Iaponchik's ascendancy.[45] The subtlety is largely gone, and, like many of the post-Soviet volumes of anecdotes, cookbooks, and historical fiction, Smirnov's novel is accompanied by a mini–Odessan-language dictionary, namely, one largely comprised of Yiddish and thieves' cant.

The conflation of Jewishness and criminality is also pervasive in many of the films that have been produced since 1989, particularly in *The Carter and the King* and *The Art of Living in Odessa* (*Iskusstvo zhit' v Odesse*), both of which are based on Babel's stories. In the *Carter and the King,* Benia Krik's gangsters use a mock Jewish funeral to outwit the police following a shootout. In another scene piety,

crime, and violence come together, when the cantor briefly interrupts his Hebrew prayer to pull out a gun and shoot a rat, while Benia Krik quietly sits amid the congregation receiving messages from his subordinates. In *The Art of Living in Odessa* Reb Arye-Leib faithfully forewarns Benia Krik of an impending police raid, thus illustrating how in old Odessa the devout work for the deviant.[46] And in the tradition of Babel, the gangster wedding is the climactic moment of disorder: the police station burns to the ground while the festivities are in progress. The apogee of merriment in old Odessa is rooted in the Jewish bandit's triumph over the autocracy, a point underscored by the film's soundtrack, as the classic tune "Havah nagilah" ("Let Us Rejoice") is playing while the fragile outpost of tsarist law and order is consumed by the flames.[47] The Jewish gangster is still the archetypal Odessit, and, although most of these sagas are stories recycled from earlier times, they are embellished with an unprecedented amount of explicit Jewishness.

To be sure, not all of Odessa's present-day antiquarians profess that Russia's Eldorado was a homogeneous community of crooked and dissolute Jews. One such reputedly admirable Odessit was Franz de Voland, the architect of Odessa's port, whose memoirs were republished locally in 2002. The book's editors, Aleksandr Taubenshlak and Boris Eidel'man, note that de Voland was a "man of honor," but in Odessa, "where theft is often a virtue, where bandits become folk heroes, people completely forget about architecture."[48] But Taubenshlak and Eidel'man seem to miss the irony of their observation: the publishing house they run, Optimum, has issued dozens of books celebrating Odessa's criminality, including several volumes of Faitel'berg-Blank's *The Bandits of Odessa* as well as a biography of Mishka Iaponchik. Eidel'man himself has compiled a dictionary of the Odessan language, which, like all such dictionaries, gives primacy to thieves' cant of Hebraic origin.[49] If Franz de Voland has been forgotten to history, then Taubenshlak and Eidel'man have played a pivotal role in his disappearance. De Voland may have designed Odessa's port, but his memory is overshadowed by the legions of smugglers who flooded it with contraband; they are the ones now venerated as the true architects of old Odessa.

We Lived and Basked in Old Odessa

Old Odessa suffered from the assault unleashed by the proletarian state. The builders of socialism vowed to decimate its bandits and prostitutes, and the ideologues of socialist culture yearned to eradicate its music and humor. The inception of Glasnost and the Soviet Union's subsequent collapse eliminated old Odessa's antagonists, and mythmakers were now able to reflect openly upon their city's fate in a way that had hitherto been impossible, including the opportunity to ascribe guilt to the communist regime for its attack against their beloved Odessa-Mama. "They prohibited us from speaking the Odessan language," maintains Zhvanetskii, "from singing Odessa's songs and dancing to them. Different brigades from vari-

ous cities came here to establish order."[50] And the proletarian culture that the new order begat was, avowedly, alien to Odessa, as it stifled the true spirit of the masses. Communism inflicted damage upon the essence of old Odessa, upon the souls of its people.

But the new cohort of mythmakers differ from their predecessors in one important respect: they tend to believe that old Odessa did not end with the Bolshevik triumph.[51] Despite the decades of Stalinism, class struggle, and socialist realism, old Odessa was not eradicated in the era before Glasnost. Post-Soviet mythmakers depict the Odessit as a fighter and a survivor who ensured that his city remained a solitary island of carnival, criminality, and humor within an ocean of repression, temperance, and cultural homogeneity. "Old Odessa" was the city's history and, accordingly, it *had* to have endured Stalin, World War II, and Brezhnev, even if the allegedly monolithic state had subdued its ostentatiousness.

Many post-Soviet mythmakers contend that Odessa's thieves survived the Revolution and continued to practice their roguery, inasmuch as conditions permitted. Viktor Faitel'berg-Blank illustrates how some gangsters shrewdly inveigled their way into state institutions; Naftalii Frenkel', for example, was an enterprising smuggler and narcotics kingpin who convinced Stalin that he had the requisite acumen to efficiently reorganize and administer the Soviet labor camp system.[52] Anatolii Barbakaru tellingly *begins* one of his history books with Mishka Iaponchik, whose death had formerly symbolized the *end* of old Odessa. Such thieves may no longer have been as brazen as their prerevolutionary ancestors, but they were still there: an animated society of transgressors who resisted proletarianization and all it entailed. They were a genuine community, argues Barbakaru, who describes the apartment of one Odessit, known by the moniker "Ryzhii" ("Red"), as "not simply a 'criminal den' ['*malina*'], but a home for his kind of people . . . an oasis, a Mecca for local drunks and swindlers of all stripes."[53] The shooting of Mishka Iaponchik did not mark the end of old Odessa; the city of sin merely entered a new phase of its existence.

Like his prerevolutionary forerunner, the Odessit of the Soviet era was now imagined as a rogue who delighted in the depiction of his own kind in the theater and in song. The Soviet actor Evgenii Vesnik, who played Ostap Bender in a stage production of *The Golden Calf* during the 1950s, learned firsthand how Odessa's thieves passionately embraced the myth that celebrated them. During his performance in the city, Vesnik was unexpectedly greeted with guffaws and a round of applause when he (as Ostap Bender) declared to his sidekick that "I have lately had some disagreements with Soviet power: they want to build socialism, but I don't."[54] "After the show," Vesnik writes, "a local colonel of the police explained to me that all the tickets for this performance had been purchased by robbers, speculators, and other criminal elements: they wanted to see their 'own' ['*rodnoi*'] Ostap for

themselves." Vesnik ended up spending a month recuperating in one of Odessa's resorts, having broken his leg in an accident on stage. But Odessa's charming criminality managed to pervade Vesnik's otherwise mundane convalescence:

> Every single morning I received a wicker basket that contained two bottles of beer and six crayfish, which were occasionally still warm. Nobody could explain who would show such concern for me, and [due to my injury] it was a while before I was able to hobble over to the front gate and ask the watchman. For quite some time he would say nothing to me about it, until I finally found out:
>
> "You'll understand that I cannot tell you their names, but I can tell you who they are. They are the thieves and carters [*bindiuzhniki*] from Odessa's market."
>
> "Really? Why are they doing this?"
>
> "Because you played Ostap Bender. Our Ostap."[55]

Odessa's notorious bandits continued to revere the artists who popularized and satirized their escapades, for old Odessa was not merely about criminality; it was about the festive conflation of criminality and art.

Equally admired were the musicians who perpetuated the city's decadent spirit through the performance of criminal folksongs, those who helped ensure that old Odessa's notoriety survived the dark night of socialism. If Odessa was an island of decadent freedom, then Leonid Utesov was "Odessa's ambassador in Moscow," as Evgenii Golubovskii puts it.[56] "In an epoch of slavery," writes Vladimir Kavtorin, "Utesov was the living, irrepressible, freedom-loving soul of the times."[57] He is remembered as having been impervious to the increasingly monolithic Soviet culture, as he radiated old Odessa, which was too compelling to resist, even for the leaders of the Kremlin. Mikhail Shul'man provides an amusing illustration:

> My sister Simonna Shul'man, who worked for the newspaper *Vecherniaia Moskva,* received an anonymous letter from a group of Odessans, which, if the authors had signed, would have caused them problems. There had been a gala evening at the Kremlin, honoring [Valerii] Chkalov's non-stop flight from Moscow to New York, an occasion at which Utesov's orchestra performed. At the request of [Lazar] Kaganovich, Utesov played a few Odessan criminal folksongs, including the famous "From the Odessa Jail," which they played with fantastic success. There were four thousand guests, and, naturally, the cat was let out of the bag [*shila v meshke ne utaish´*], and by morning, all of Moscow knew about this. The Odessans who sent the anonymous letter rudely expressed their resentment over the playing of "their" songs. . . ."They can listen to our Utesov, and we can't? Why do they have the right to our Utesov? To our songs? Fine, so if the

> Kremlin can listen to these songs, then we demand the repeal of the prohibition against the playing of our—we Odessans—beloved songs!!!"[58]

Old Odessa was *their* property, and the Kremlin's appropriation of Utesov was tantamount to the theft of their heritage.

But the "loss" of Utesov and the many other mythmakers who settled in Moscow did not prevent Odessans from honoring their city. Post-Soviet mythmakers maintain that the music of old Odessa resounded in the city's courtyards, streets, and restaurants, despite the Soviet government's attempted proscription. During the 1960s and 1970s Mikhail Poizner remembers that,

> singing Odessa's songs was, to put it mildly, not recommended by officials. Nevertheless, as soon as somebody started singing a new tune anywhere, within a day it had been picked up by the entire city. The lyrics were painstakingly copied and retold, and their jumpy [*skachushchie*] melodies immediately penetrated the listeners and would not leave them. Because this is—Odessa.[59]

Old songs were given new lyrics to keep up with the times, and no topic was too serious to escape the Odessit's ribald humor. When a cholera epidemic broke out in the 1970s, Odessans reworked the classic folksong "A Tavern Opened on Deribasovskaia Street" in honor of the plague:

> Na Deribasovskoi otkrylasia kholera,
> Ee spoimala odna b—ot kavalera,
> Pust' Boga net, no Bog nakazhet etu babu,
> Chto v podvorotne vydala arabu.
> i vot ot etoi nerazborchivosti zhenskoi,
> Kholera pret uzhe po vsei Preobrazhenskoi.
>
> Cholera started on Deribasovskaia Street,
> A wh—caught it from an admirer.
> There is no God, but God will punish this broad,
> Who gave herself in an alley to an Arab.
> And now due to such female promiscuity,
> Cholera is pushing its way down Preobrazhenskaia Street.[60]

Poizner's Odessa was a dynamic realm of tricksters, thieves, and entertainers, which included his friend Iurii Davydov, who "played accordion for the local bandits [*naletchiki*] on Shalashnyi Street," or the "legendary Fima," known as the "Postman

of Odessa" (*Odesskii pochtal'on*), who would show up uninvited to Odessan weddings and serenade the bride and groom.[61] Old Odessa was magical, and it managed to escape the cultural stagnation and ossification of the Brezhnev era.

The mythmakers of the post-Soviet era replicated, recycled, and embellished many of the stories, jokes, and songs that their Soviet (and pre-Soviet) predecessors had told and retold about Russia's Eldorado. But the post-Soviet cohort of mythmakers expanded the city of sin's temporal boundaries. Those who had venerated old Odessa during the 1960s, such as Leonid Utesov and Konstantin Paustovskii, had maintained that Russia's Eldorado had perished with the Revolution. Most of their successors, however, saw things differently, as they were convinced that they had seen old Odessa with their own eyes and had physically partaken in the city's enduring merriment. Socialism had avowed to negate giddy old Odessa with industry and temperance, but the Odessans who outlasted socialism refused to admit that such an atrocity could have transpired. Old Odessa was *their* memory; they were survivors from the fabled city of rogues and schnorrers.[62]

EPILOGUE *The End of Old Odessa*

"We have not had enough of you, Benia Krik," wistfully declares Svetlana Donskaia in a refrain echoed by *all* of Odessa's post-Soviet mythmakers, who have unremittingly tried to keep the Jewish gangster's spirit alive, some even suggesting that he physically survived the Revolution that sought to destroy him.[1] In a fictional account of Isaac Babel's life, Robert A. Rosenstone "reveals" what *really* became of Benia Krik:

> So here and now, in this cemetery, sitting on this wall, I will reveal to you what really happened to Benia Krik. It's simple as spinning a dreidel. He got away. Through connections—and who had more connections than the king?—Benia stowed away on a boat that took him from Odessa across the Black Sea, through the Dardanelles, across the St. Lawrence River to Montreal, in Canada. That's where Benia ended up. . . . Benia changed his title and his name and went into some familiar activities. Canada is a civilized country. So there was no need for guns, robberies, murders of colleagues. In Montreal, Benia went into numbers and bookmaking. Like everyone else in the rackets . . . Benia got rich during the Depression and even richer during the Second World War. He married again and had four kids . . . and all but one entered legitimate rackets: one was a lawyer, one a doctor, and one an academic. But the fourth child Benia trained in his old profession. Let's face it. He was a man with a sense of tradition and history.[2]

Benia Krik's alter ego, Mishka Iaponchik, may have also fled in the face of the Bolsheviks' onslaught, as depicted in the film *Déjà Vu,* where Iaponchik is last seen boarding a ship for America. Before departing, Iaponchik turns his gaze upon his city one last time and sadly exclaims: "So long, farewell Odessa–Mama, New York–Papa awaits me."[3] Yet neither New York nor Montreal could ever replace the magic of old Odessa—the Russian Jew's golden calf—even if their new homes in the new world provided as much ill-begotten wealth as the old one had. After all, Benia Krik was "smart enough to know," writes Rosenstone, "that one day the Revolution would be over, and again it would be necessary for some Krik or other to come along and provide the kind of services that would make life in Odessa livable. Someday that kid of Benia's is going to return to Odessa. Just you wait and see."[4]

The myth of old Odessa did, in fact, survive the Bolshevik Revolution, Stalinism, World War Two, and the stagnation of the Brezhnev era. And when Gorbachev's government curtailed censorship, the myth returned with a vengeance. Even if Benia Krik's progeny have not come home to reclaim their dynastic crown, old Odessa's mythmakers can now proudly celebrate the city's notorious criminality and its frivolous Jewish humor without having to fear the onslaught of their puritanical enemies who sought to raze the city of sin, just as God had decimated Sodom and Gomorrah. In this sense, old Odessa has won the battle. But on a certain level, old Odessa has lost: with nobody vilifying Russia's Eldorado anymore, nobody vowing to destroy it, part of its danger is gone, and the danger of impending destruction was always fundamental to its allure. Old Odessa's detractors were no less integral than its proponents were to the mythmaking process. Paradoxically the collapse of the Soviet Union has engendered the renaissance of old Odessa *and* the further retreat of its golden age into the realm of collective memory.

NOTES

Introduction

1. Paustovskii, *The Story of a Life,* 39–40.

2. The most important works in English on Odessa's history and culture include Herlihy, *Odessa;* Sylvester, *Tales of Old Odessa;* Zipperstein, *The Jews of Odessa;* Weinberg, *The Revolution of 1905 in Odessa;* and Richardson, *Kaleidoscopic Odessa.* In *Tales of Old Odessa,* Sylvester explores the shaping of Odessa's image through the popular press in the early twentieth century. Although she devotes significant attention to criminality, her primary objective is to trace the construction of a middle-class identity in the public sphere, with Jewishness and humor playing a secondary role in her analysis. Moreover, Sylvester does not cover the Soviet era. The only academic work to approach Odessa from the perspective of its myth as a Jewish city of sin is an essay by Rothstein, "How It Was Sung in Odessa," 781–801.

3. Anthropologists and folklorists have often sought to distinguish the "myth" from the "legend" and from the "folktale." Many scholars have argued that myths deal with gods, monsters, and supernatural events, often before the beginning of time. Legends and folktales, conversely, take place *within* time and usually involve human beings. See the essays by Bascom and Rogerson as well as Dundes's introduction in *Sacred Narrative.* Other scholars, however, suggest that such distinctions do not always work and advocate a more expansive definition of myth. Robert Segal points out that every academic discipline holds multiple theories of myth and mythology. See Segal, *Myth.* The distinction between "myth," "legend," and "folktale" is not always obvious, and, accordingly, I use the terms interchangeably in the chapters that follow.

4. Bo Strath, "Introduction," in Strath, *Myth and Memory in the Construction of Community,* 37.

5. Benedict Anderson's term "imagined community" is thus applicable in such instances, even though he limits the use of the concept to the study of nations. All communities that are trans-local (i.e., whose members can never know each and every other member) are imagined in the sense that Anderson employs the term. See Anderson, *Imagined Communities.*

6. Strauss, *Images of the American,* 8.

7. Sharpe and Wallock, "From 'Great Town' to 'Nonplace Urban Realm,'" 9.

8. Peter Preston and Paul Simpson-Housley, "Introduction," in Preston and Simpson-Housley, *Writing the City,* 2.

9. Sharpe and Wallock, "'From 'Great Town' to 'Nonplace Urban Realm,'" 6.

10. On biblical cities, see Ellul, *The Meaning of the City.*

11. Schneider, *Babylon Is Everywhere,* 14.

12. Rev. 17:5, 14:8. All biblical quotations are taken from the King James edition.

13. Isa. 13:19.

14. For examples of San Francisco's depiction as a city of sin, see Evans, *A la California;* Asbury, *The Barbary Coast;* and Mungo, *San Francisco Confidential.*

15. For some examples of Shanghai's depiction as a city of sin, see Dong, *Shanghai;* Pan, *Old Shanghai;* and Baker, *Shanghai.*

16. For examples of the depiction of New Orleans as a city of sin, see Rose, *Storyville, New Orleans;* Asbury, *The French Quarter;* and Flake, *New Orleans.*

17. There is, of course, a vast body of literature on the frontier in American history, particularly on the role the frontier has played in shaping the social, economic, and cultural character of the United States. Scholars, however, have generally neglected the process of urbanization on the frontier, focusing instead on what David Hamer has called "the cult of the cowboy," the conquest of the wilderness and the settlement of the open land. See Hamer, *New Towns in the New World.* See also Wade, *The Urban Frontier.*

18. On the foreign penetration of Shanghai and the establishment of the international concessions, see Martin, *The Shanghai Green Gang,* 5.

19. The relationship between seaports and the perception of crime can be seen in Willet, *The Naked City.* Willet's book includes six chapters dedicated to six different cities. Five of them are seaports: Los Angeles, San Francisco, New York, Miami, and New Orleans.

20. David Hamer argues that urban boosters, including city governments, steamship lines, and railroad companies, offered prospective settlers "abstractions . . . which had little to do with the reality of the place to which migrants were being invited but referred to universally shared perceptions of the New World—as utopia, as Arcadia, as El Dorado. For what many migrants wished to go to was not so much a specific geographical location as an ideal concept of 'a better world.'" See Hamer, *New Towns in the New World,* 10.

21. Long, *The Great Southern Babylon,* 2.

22. On Jewish criminals in Germany, see Otto Ulbricht, "Criminality and Punishment of the Jews in the Early Modern Period," in Hsia and Lehmann, *In and Out of the Ghetto.* On Jewish criminals in eighteenth-century England, see Endelman, *The Jews of Georgian England,* chap. 6. On Jewish gangsters in America, see Singer, "The Jewish Gangster," 70–77; Gold, *Jews without Money;* Fried, *The Rise and Fall of the Jewish Gangster;* Mensch, "Social Pathology in Urban America"; Block, "Lepke, Kid Twist, and the Combination"; Weissman-Joselit, *Our Gang;* Keefe, *The Starker;* and Cohen, *Tough Jews.*

23. On medieval Jewry's role in money lending, see Parkes, *The Jew in the Medieval Community,* chap. 10; and Shatzmiller, *Shylock Reconsidered.*

24. Deut. 23:19–20; R. Po-Chia Hsia, "The Usurious Jew: Economic Structure and Religious Representations in an Anti-Semitic Discourse," in Hsia and Lehmann, *In and Out of the Ghetto;* Glassman, *Anti-Semitic Stereotypes without Jews,* 14.

25. Trachtenberg, *The Devil and the Jews,* 188.

26. Although scholars have demonstrated the ubiquity of the image of the perfidious Jewish moneylender, it is also true that not every Christian believed these images, and many, in fact, held positive views of Jewish moneylenders whom they knew personally. See Shatzmiller, *Shylock Reconsidered.*

27. Glassman, *Anti-Semitic Stereotypes;* Felsenstein, *Anti-Semitic Stereotypes;* Rosenberg, *From Shylock to Svengali;* Chazan, *Medieval Stereotypes and Modern Antisemitism;* Trachtenberg, *The Devil and the Jews.*

28. Matt. 27:3.

29. Rosenberg, *From Shylock to Svengali,* 27. The Jews had been expelled from England in 1290 and were warily readmitted under Oliver Cromwell beginning in the mid-seventeenth century.

30. Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice.* There is, of course, a vast amount of scholarship on Shylock the character, Shylock as a metaphor for Jewish criminality, and Shylock's Jewishness. See, for instance, Bloom, *Shylock;* and Gross, *Shylock.*

31. Dickens, *The Adventures of Oliver Twist,* 167, 437.

32. For an analysis of Shylock and Fagin in the larger context of anti-Semitism in English literature, see Julius, *Trials of the Diaspora,* chap. 4.

33. Gilman, *Jewish Self-Hatred,* 69.

34. Luther, *The Book of Vagabonds and Beggars.* See Gilman, *Jewish Self-Hatred,* for a discussion of Luther's work.

35. For examples of criminal slang dictionaries published in later centuries in Germany, see von Grolman, *Wörterbuch der in Teutschland üblichen Spitzbubensprachen;* Ostwald, *Rinnsteinsprache.*

36. Examples include *Chayes, cheuder, achelei,* and *emmes,* which connote "life," "room," "food," and "truth," respectively. Despite the many phonetic corruptions, such words are faithful to their original Hebrew (and, in most cases, Yiddish) meanings. See Ostwald, *Rinnsteinsprache,* 32, 33, 10; and Grolman, *Wörterbuch,* 18.

37. It must be underscored that such sources do not provide an accurate reflection of Jewish-Gentile relations in modern Germany, just as Shylock and Fagin do not represent what all Christians thought of Jews in England. Rather, they reveal a set of ideas that often (but not always) served as guiding principles, a discursive template that influenced Gentile attitudes toward the Jews, in conjunction with many other social, economic, and political factors.

38. Endelman, *The Jews of Georgian England,* 213.

39. For a discussion of the stereotype of the Jew as sickly and effeminate, see Efron, *Medicine and the German Jews,* chap. 4; Gilman, *The Jew's Body;* and Medding, *Jews and Violence.*

40. Nineteenth-century Jewish historians in Germany, including Leopold Zunz and Heinrich Graetz, presented much of medieval Jewish history in this light. Salo Baron subsequently challenged this "lachrymose" approach to Jewish history, in "Ghetto and Emancipation," 419–434. Later observers would view the Holocaust as the culmination of the unending powerlessness and passivity of European Jewry. See Biale, *Power and Powerless in Jewish History,* 141–142. See also Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews.*

41. In *Power and Powerless in Jewish History,* David Biale demonstrates that the stereotype of Jewish powerlessness in history is more fictitious than real. Although Biale is concerned with political power rather than physical power, he recognizes that the two are connected, mutually reinforcing each other in representations (and self-representations) of Jews. On Jewish violence in history, see Medding, *Jews and Violence;* and Horowitz, *Reckless Rites,* esp. chap. 7.

42. On Zionism's attempt to negate the Diaspora through the physical and cultural transformation of the Jewish people, see, for instance, Stanislawski, *Zionism and the Fin de Siècle.* Max Nordau popularized the idea of the "Jewry of muscle" (*Muskeljudentum*), valorizing ancient Israel's heroes as role models and encouraging young Jews to leave the Talmud in favor of playing sports. Zionists also claimed that Yiddish was an effeminate language because of its whining intonation, and that its hybrid nature (combining German, Hebrew, Slavic, and other languages) demonstrated the damaged and unhealthy state of the stateless Jewish people. Many advocated the adoption of Hebrew, because it was the spoken language of the "tough" Israelites of antiquity. See Harshav, *Language in Time of Revolution.*

43. Aleksandr Kuprin, "Trus," in Kuprin, *Sobranie sochinenii,* 3:225–226.

44. The Jewish criminal in medieval and early modern discourse is usually depicted as physically frail and cowardly, and, in this sense, such images are not incompatible with the imagined sickly condition of European Jewry in exile.

45. Sholem Asch, "Kola Street," in Howe and Greenberg, *A Treasury of Yiddish Stories,* 262.

46. Asch, *Mottke, the Thief.*

47. Opatoshu, "Romance of a Horse Thief."

48. Ornitz, *Haunch Paunch and Jowl,* 49.

49. Ibid., 50.

50. Lafitte, *The Journal of Jean Lafitte,* 41. Many scholars have maintained that Lafitte's journal is a forgery, dating it from the mid-nineteenth century, several decades after his death. See, for instance, Ramsay, *Jean Laffite,* 147–152. Even if it is a forgery, it still represents an attempt to portray the freebooter's strength, zeal, and heroism as (at least in part) a response to Jewish persecution.

51. Cited in Cohen, *Tough Jews,* 42.

52. Glassman, *Anti-Semitic Stereotypes,* 21.

53. The romanticization of tough Jews as the negation of Jewish stereotypes remains popular today. See, for instance, the website at http://www.j-grit.com, "J-Grit: The Internet Index of Tough Jews."

54. Critchley, *On Humour,* 10.

55. Emanuel S. Goldsmith, "Sholom Aleichem's Humor of Affirmation and Survival," in Ziv and Zajdman, *Semites and Stereotypes,* 13–14.

56. Avner Ziv, "Psycho-Social Aspects of Jewish Humor in Israel and in the Diaspora," in Ziv, *Jewish Humor,* 51.

57. Freud, *Jokes and Their Relations to the Unconscious,* 133. Some scholars have argued that Jewish humor is masochistic, a fact reflected in the self-deprecating nature of Jewish anecdotes. This thesis was most elaborately developed by Martin Grotjahn in "Jewish Jokes and Their Relation to Masochism," in Mendel, *A Celebration of Laughter.* Other scholars have challenged this idea, insisting that Jewish jokes are not masochistic because they usually insult a particular subgroup within Jewish society, to which the joke teller does not belong. See Ben-Amos, "The 'Myth' of Jewish Humor," 112–131; Davies, *Ethnic Humor around the World;* and Christie Davies, "Exploring the Thesis of the Self-Deprecating Jewish Sense of Humor," in Ziv and Zajdman, *Semites and Stereotypes.*

58. Sarah Blacher Cohen, "Introduction," in Cohen, *Jewish Wry,* 1.

59. Ibid., 2.

60. Wex, *Born to Kvetch,* 6.

61. Wisse, *The Schlemiel as Modern Hero,* 11.

62. On Jewish logic and Talmudic hairsplitting, see Telushkin, *Jewish Humor,* chap. 2; Reik, *Jewish Wit,* 115–119; Wex, *Born to Kvetch,* 12–13; Berger, *The Genius of the Jewish Joke,* 72; Wisse, *The Schlemiel as Modern Hero,* 10–11; Cohen, "Introduction," 2.

63. Richler, *St. Urbain's Horseman,* 297–298.

64. Wex, *Born to Kvetch,* 226.

65. Novak and Waldoks, *The Big Book of Jewish Humor,* 178.

66. Cited in Telushkin, *Jewish Humor,* 83–84.

67. Cited in Ausubel, *A Treasury of Jewish Folklore,* 285. Variations of this joke have appeared many times in collections of Jewish humor, including Freud's analytical work on

jokes. See Freud, *Jokes,* 134. In chapter 3 we examine how Ostap Bender, one of the most popular fictional swindlers in Soviet literature, "modernized" the art of schnorring to fit the Soviet context.

68. Bernard N. Schilling, "On Jewish Humor," in Zangwill, *The King of the Schnorrers,* x; Novak and Waldoks, *The Big Book of Jewish Humor,* 178; Telushkin, *Jewish Humor,* 168.

69. Zangwill, *The King of the Schnorrers,* 28.

70. The most famous trickster in Jewish folklore is Hershele Ostropolier, a real eighteenth-century Jew who lived in Ukraine. See Ausubel, *A Treasury of Jewish Folklore,* 304–319; Stern, *Hershele Ostropoler un Motke Hb"d;* Wisse, *The Schlemiel as Modern Hero,* 11–12. Isaac Babel had planned to write a cycle of stories about Hershele Ostropolier but only completed one, "Shabos-Nakhamu," which appears in *The Complete Works of Isaac Babel.*

71. Assessing the relationship between oral "popular" culture and written "high" culture is, of course, problematic. Meyer Wiener insists that Sholem Aleichem, the father of Yiddish literature, faithfully captured the language and manner of "the ordinary Jew" more than anyone else in his generation of writers. See Meyer Wiener, "On Sholom Aleichem's Humor," in Cohen, *Jewish Wry,* 43. Emanuel S. Goldsmith suggests that the roots of Sholem Aleichem's humor can be found in the comical plays Jews performed during the holiday of Purim (known as *purim-shpiln*), as well as the performances of masters of ceremonies at Jewish weddings (who were known as *badkhonim*). See Goldsmith, "Sholom Aleichem's Humor of Affirmation and Survival," 13–14, 22.

72. See Markfield, "The Yiddishization of American Humor," 114–115, 136. According to one study conducted in 1975, 80 percent of the "most successful" comics in America were Jewish, even though Jews only made up 3 percent of the population. See Ziv, "Psycho-Social Aspects of Jewish Humor," 59. See also Epstein, *The Haunted Smile.*

73. Corrsin, *Warsaw before the First World War,* 145.

74. *Evreiskoe naselenie Rossii,* 72. With the partial exception of Odessa, the Jewish communities in all these cities were decimated during the Holocaust.

75. Emigration from the Pale of Settlement, of course, did not solely lead to the growth of Jewish communities in the United States. Jews settled in substantial numbers throughout the Americas, in Australia, in Palestine, and, after 1917, in the major Russian cities outside the Pale, most notably Moscow and Petrograd (later known as Leningrad). See Slezkine, *The Jewish Century,* chap. 4.

76. Eli Lederhendler, "New York City, The Jews, and 'The Urban Experience,'" in Mendelsohn, *People of the City,* 54–55.

77. On the history of the Jews of Vilna and Lithuania, see Nikzentaitis, Schreiner, and Staliunas, *The Vanished World of Lithuanian Jews;* and Levin, *The Litvaks.*

78. On the Vilna Gaon, see Etkes, *The Gaon of Vilna.*

79. On Warsaw's Jewish criminals, see Corrsin, *Warsaw before the First World War,* 15–16.

80. See, for instance, Asch, *Mottke, the Thief;* Singer, *Scum;* Singer, *In My Father's Court.*

81. Corrsin, *Warsaw before the First World War,* 16.

82. Bruce, *How to Talk Dirty and Influence People,* 5; Joyce, "Jackson Denies Using Term Offensive to Jews."

83. According to David Cesarini, Salo Baron was the first historian to point out the connection between port cities and modernization among the Jews, noting how the Sephardic *Conversos* who fled the Spanish and Portuguese Inquisition for the prosperous seaports of

northern Europe (including Bordeaux, Amsterdam, London, and Hamburg) entered into a hitherto unknown type of relationship with the state—one based on economic utilitarianism rather than religious ideology. The concept of the "port Jew" is further developed by David Sorkin in "The Port Jew," 87–97. For Sorkin (as for Baron), the port Jew was a progeny of Sephardic Jewry. Other scholars, however, adopted Sorkin's concept and started applying it to other Jewish communities across Europe and the Americas. See Dubin, *The Port Jews of Habsburg Trieste;* Cesarini, *Port Jews;* Herlihy, "Port Jews of Odessa and Trieste," 183–198; and Cesarini and Romain, *Jews and Port Cities.* The only scholar to investigate the relationship between Jews and the dissolute temptations of the port city is Adam Sutcliffe in his examination of seventeenth-century Amsterdam and London. See Adam Sutcliffe, "Identity, Space, and Intercultural Contact in the Urban Entrepôt: The Sephardic Bounding of Community in Early Modern Amsterdam and London," in Cesarini and Romain, *Jews and Port Cities.*

84. Cesarini, "Introduction," in Cesarini and Romain, *Jews and Port Cities,* 2.

85. See Zipperstein, *The Jews of Odessa.*

86. See Atlas, *Staraia Odessa.*

87. Aleksandr Pushkin made one important contribution to the Odessa myth: his character Evgenii Onegin briefly stops in Odessa where he delights in the sea, the balmy weather, the wine, and the abundance of exotic foods; see chapter 1 of this volume. Vlas Doroshevich and Aleksandr Kuprin were integral contributors to the Odessa myth; see chapter 2, this volume.

88. See Slezkine, *The Jewish Century,* chap. 4.

89. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World,* 9.

90. Ibid., 73.

91. Clark and Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin,* 300.

92. Ibid., 27.

93. Despite his reputation as a hard-line Stalinist, Lazar Kaganovich was a big fan of Utesov's jazz music. See Starr, *Red and Hot,* 127. Utesov apparently played a personal concert for Stalin in the 1930s, which included his renditions of four criminal folk songs that had been branded as anathema: "Murka," "S odesskogo kichmana" ("From the Odessa Jail"), "Gop so smykom," and "Limonchiki." See Dzhekobson and Dzhekobson, *Pesennyi fol'klor GULAGa kak istoricheskii istochnik (1940–1991),* 12.

1. The Birth of Old Odessa

1. Rabinovich, "Istoriia a tom," 27–30.

2. On the history of the territory on which Odessa resides before the city's foundation, see Faitel'berg-Blank and Savchenko, *Odessa do . . . Odessy.*

3. Peter the Great went to war against the Ottoman Empire in 1695–1696. Although Russia won and acquired some territory around the Black Sea, these gains were lost in a subsequent war in 1711. See Sumner, *Peter the Great and the Ottoman Empire.*

4. Russia acquired New Russia through two wars against Turkey: 1768–1774, which ended with the Treaty of Kuchuk Kainarji; and 1787–1792, which ended with the Treaty of Jassy. See Tret'iak, *Rozhdeniie goroda,* 8–66.

5. Herlihy, *Odessa,* 6. Novorossiia was later subdivided into four provinces (*gubernii*): Kherson (which included Odessa), Ekaterinoslav, Taurida, and Bessarabia.

6. Harvey, "The Development of Russian Commerce," 43, 56.

7. Ibid., 57; Herlihy, *Odessa,* 7.

8. On the history of Khadzhibei, see Skinner, "City Planning in Russia," 29–33. On the storming and capture of Khadzhibei, see Tret'iak, *Rozhdeniie goroda,* 16–30.

9. *Stoletie Odessy,* 16; Herlihy, *Odessa,* 7; Harvey, "The Development of Russian Commerce," 57; Skinner, "City Planning in Russia," 20.

10. Catherine decreed the city Russian in May 1794; it was named "Odessa" in January 1795. *Stoletie Odessy,* 16.

11. Skinner, "City Planning in Russia," 57–58.

12. Some Greek artifacts had been found in the area of Khadzhibei and a popular eighteenth-century atlas had mistakenly placed Odessos in the region. Skinner, "City Planning in Russia," 57 n. 51. Odessos, in fact, had been located on the site of the Bulgarian city of Varna. Nevertheless, Greek settlements dotted the Black Sea littoral at various times from the classical era onward. See Mazis, *The Greeks of Odessa,* chap. 1.

13. King, *The Black Sea,* 162.

14. Herlihy, *Odessa,* 15.

15. St. Petersburg, Moscow, and Warsaw were more populous than Odessa. Only St. Petersburg had a more active port. Frederick, W. Skinner, "Odessa and the Problem of Urban Modernization," in Hamm, *The City in Late Imperial Russia,* 209.

16. Herlihy, *Odessa,* 12. See also de Voland, *Moia zhizn' v Rossii.*

17. For biographies of Odessa's administrators, see Skinner, "City Planning in Russia," 47–49, 114–115, 142–143, 160–166; and Herlihy, *Odessa,* 20–30, 114–122, 155–157.

18. Herlihy, *Odessa,* 98.

19. Harvey, "The Development of Russian Commerce," 70–72.

20. Herlihy, *Odessa,* 98, 100. Herlihy insists that this development was more significant economically than the granting of free port status to Odessa.

21. Ibid., 97.

22. Harvey, "The Development of Russian Commerce," 85.

23. Herlihy, *Odessa,* 96.

24. Skinner, "City Planning in Russia," 151–152; Harvey, "The Development of Russian Commerce," 76, 414–416.

25. Herlihy, *Odessa,* 251; Skinner, "City Planning in Russia," 157.

26. In 1910 St. Petersburg had a population of 1,566,000; in Moscow it was 1,481,240; in Warsaw, 781,179; and in Odessa, 620,143. Michael F. Hamm, "Introduction," in Hamm, *The City in Late Imperial Russia,* 3. Between 1856 and 1897 Odessa's population grew by 3.42 percent annually; for St. Petersburg the figure is 2.34 percent and for Moscow 2.56 percent. See Herlihy, "The Ethnic Composition of the City of Odessa," 54–55.

27. Herlihy, *Odessa,* 15, 25.

28. Zipperstein, *The Jews of Odessa,* 34. On the residency restrictions applied to Imperial Russia's Jews and the establishment of the Pale of Settlement, see Pipes, "Catherine II and the Jews," 3–20; and Klier, *Russia Gathers Her Jews.*

29. Herlihy, *Odessa,* 16.

30. Ibid.

31. Ibid., 21. Odessa received a separate governorship in 1803. The city's first official governor was the Frenchman Armand-Emmanuel du Plessis, Duc de Richelieu (1803–1814). He was followed by his compatriot Alexander Langeron (1815–1823).

32. Ibid., 44. On Italian culture in Odessa, see Makolkin, *The Nineteenth Century in Odessa.*

33. Herlihy, *Odessa,* 242.

34. Herlihy, "Ethnic Composition," 56, 77. The 1897 census did not include a category for either ethnicity or nationality. Thus mother tongue and religion are the most reliable indicators of ethnicity in Imperial Russia.

35. On the history of the Greek community in the Black Sea region, see Mazis, *The Greeks of Odessa,* chap. 1.

36. The Greek merchants of Odessa contributed one hundred thousand rubles to the war effort against Napoleon in 1812 (ibid., 43).

37. Ibid.

38. Herlihy, *Odessa,* 214. See also Marie Vassilikou, "Greeks and Jews in Salonika and Odessa: Inter-ethnic Relations in Cosmopolitan Port Cities," in Cesarini, *Port Jews,* 155–172.

39. Kotler, *Ocherki,* 24.

40. Ibid., 11.

41. Belousova and Volkova, *Evrei Odessy i iuga Ukrainy,* 5.

42. Kotler, *Ocherki,* 11.

43. The partitions of Poland took place in 1772, 1793, and 1795 between Russia, Prussia, and Austria. On Russia's acquisition of Polish territory and its Jewish population, see Pipes, "Catherine II and the Jews"; and Klier, *Russia Gathers Her Jews.*

44. Historians today generally accept that the Russian government was not motivated by anti-Semitism in confining the Jews to these western territories. Richard Pipes argues that Catherine the Great feared the eruption of hostility among Russian merchants who were then in a precarious economic position, if the Jews were permitted to conduct business in Russia proper. John Klier points out that the Russian government believed that the Jews were exploiting the peasantry; Jews had historically leased estates from the Polish nobility, ran the inns and taverns, and collected taxes in the region, as the Polish magnates preferred not to settle in the provinces, far from Poland's political, cultural, and economic centers farther west. See Pipes, "Catherine II and the Jews"; and Klier, *Russia Gathers Her Jews.* These scholars challenge earlier historians, who presented anti-Semitism as the driving force behind tsarist policy. See, for instance, Dubnow, *History of the Jews.*

45. The Pale of Settlement existed until World War I, when mass mobilization, deportations, evacuations, and the fighting ended its de facto existence. See Gatrell, *A Whole Empire Walking,* 145–150. The Russian Provisional Government formally abolished it in 1917.

46. The Russian government joined New Russia to the Pale of Settlement, despite the region's fundamentally different history from the former Polish territories.

47. Herlihy, *Odessa,* 251.

48. Kotler, *Ocherki,* 12, 17.

49. Ibid.

50. Ibid., 12.

51. *Stoletie Odessy,* 21; Kotler, *Ocherki,* 12.

52. The Haskalah in Odessa is the focus of two monographs by American historians: Zipperstein, *The Jews of Odessa;* and Orbach, *New Voices of Russian Jewry.* For a general overview of the Haskalah in Russia, see Stanislawski, *Tsar Nicholas I and the Jews.*

53. Zipperstein, *The Jews of Odessa,* 43.

54. Orbach, *New Voices,* 19; Zipperstein, *The Jews of Odessa,* 56.

55. The synagogue's first cantor was Nissan Blumenthall. Pinchas Minkovskii replaced him in 1891. Both Blumenthall and Minkovskii were celebrated for their musical talent. See Zipperstein, *The Jews of Odessa,* 58; and Rubin, "The Music of David Nowakowsky."

Traditional Jews considered instrumental music dangerous, and (with some exceptions) it had been prohibited since the destruction of the Second Temple. Musical instruments were forbidden in the synagogue, and their introduction into services by reformers led to decades of controversy in Europe and America. See Slobin, *Tenement Songs,* 15.

56. Kotler, *Ocherki,* 16.

57. For a brief comparison of the Haskalah in Vilna and Odessa, see Orbach, *New Voices,* 14. It is debatable whether the Haskalah had much of an impact on Odessa's Jewish population, despite the prominence of a handful of intellectuals. Although Orbach and Zipperstein each devoted a full monograph to Odessa's Haskalah, Zipperstein subsequently amended his thesis:

> A history of Odessa with intellectuals at the center—in other words, told in terms of an intimate reciprocity between intellectual production and an eager Jewish milieu of the sort that, we are told, existed in Vilna—would distort local cultural history and the role intellectuals played. The place of Jewish intellectuals in the shaping of local cultural life was marginal; this marginality must be seen as part of the city's Jewish story. (Zipperstein, *Imagining Russian Jewry,* 77)

58. See Stanislawski, *Tsar Nicholas I and the Jews;* and Klier, *Imperial Russia's Jewish Question.*

59. Orbach, *New Voices,* xi–xii. Maskilim in both Germany and Russia debated which language should serve as the Haskalah's primarily vehicle. While German was generally adopted in the former, in Russia the issue proved to be more complicated. German, Russian, Hebrew, and Yiddish were all considered and adopted at various points. See Orbach, *New Voices,* chap. 1; and Zipperstein, *The Jews of Odessa,* chap. 3. The Odessan Jews involved in the printing industry of the 1860s included Osip Rabinovich, Joachim Tarnopol, and Aleksandr Tsederbaum, who was the grandfather of the Menshevik Iulii Martov. See Orbach, *New Voices,* chaps. 2, 4, 5. Rabinovich was a significant contributor to the myth of old Odessa; he is discussed in greater detail later in this chapter.

60. See Frankel, *Prophecy and Politics;* and Klier, *Imperial Russia's Jewish Question.* There were, however, some Jewish intellectuals, professionals, and communal leaders who persisted in their quest to integrate Russian Jewry into the state's political framework and social structures. See Nathans, *Beyond the Pale.*

61. On the history of modern Yiddish literature, see Goldsmith, *Modern Yiddish Culture.*

62. Kotler, *Ocherki,* 26. Mendele is also considered one of the fathers of modern Hebrew literature, having started out writing in Hebrew and switching to Yiddish soon afterward. In fact, he translated many of his own works from one language to another. For an overview of Mendele's life, see Steinberg, *Mendele Mocher Seforim.*

63. Kotler, *Ocherki,* 26. Kotler lists the many other Jewish writers who lived in Odessa around the turn of the century.

64. Orbach, *New Voices,* 14.

65. Alexander Orbach contends that "Odessa in fact became the site of the first modern Jewish community in the Russian Empire" (ibid.).

66. Zipperstein, *The Jews of Odessa,* 36–39.

67. The Crimean War's disruption of trade routes and the resultant economic downturn compelled many of the Greek magnates who operated large-scale commercial firms to close

up shop. Jewish merchants, who were already securely established, survived the recession and rushed in to fill the vacuum left by the departing Greeks. The Jews were accustomed to operating at a smaller profit margin and, as middle men who ventured inland, they had personal contacts with Russia's grain producers. This relationship allowed Jewish merchants to effectively gauge the oscillation of the market. Consequently, they withstood the slump of the early 1850s. See Zipperstein, *The Jews of Odessa,* 71–72.

68. Polishchuk, *Evrei Odessy i Novorossii,* 319–320.

69. Zipperstein, *The Jews of Odessa,* 37–38.

70. Herlihy, *Odessa,* 125.

71. Polishchuk, *Evrei Odessy,* 89.

72. Zipperstein, *The Jews of Odessa,* 32.

73. Herlihy, *Odessa,* 127.

74. On the history of the Moldavanka, see Dontsova, *Moldavanka.* On crime in the Moldavanka, see Sylvester, *Tales of Old Odessa,* chaps. 1–2; Gerasimov, "My ubivaem tol'ko svoikh'," 209–260.

75. Polishchuk, *Evrei Odessy,* 88–89.

76. Weinberg, *The Revolution,* 91.

77. See chapter 2, this volume, for an examination of criminal activity among Jews in tsarist-era Odessa.

78. King, *The Black Sea,* 162.

79. Strabo *Geography,* 7.3.6, available at http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Strabo/7C*.html.

80. Cited in King, *The Black Sea,* 23.

81. Elliot, *Travels in the Three Great Empires,* 1:282.

82. Moore, *A Journey from London to Odessa,* 128.

83. Ibid., 128; Elliot, *Travels in the Three Great Empires,* 282.

84. Spencer, *Travels in Circassia,* 1:97–98.

85. On Eldorado, see Raleigh, *The Discoverie;* Zahm, *The Quest for El Dorado;* Silverberg, *The Golden Dream.*

86. Lyall, *Travels in Russia,* 125.

87. Demidov, *Travels,* 1:289.

88. Stephens, *Incidents of Travel,* 259.

89. Wikoff, *Reminiscences of an Idler,* 231.

90. de Hell, *Travels in the Steppes of the Caspian Sea,* 7.

91. Brooks, *The Russians of the South,* 23–24. See also Proctor, *A Russian Journey,* 275, who describes the "great heaps of melons"; and Demidov, *Travels in Southern Russia,* 1:321, who describes Odessans' voracious appetite for watermelons.

92. Moore, *A Journey from London to Odessa,* 155–156.

93. Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin,* 162–163.

94. Moore, *A Journey from London to Odessa,* 141.

95. Castelnau, *Essai,* 3:43.

96. O. O. Chizhevich, "Gorod Odessa i odesskoe obshchestvo (1837–1877)," in De-Ribas, *Iz proshlago Odessy,* 19.

97. Ibid., 19.

98. Brooks, *The Russians of the South,* 19; Oliphant, *The Russian Shores of the Black Sea,* 330.

99. Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin,* 161.

100. Koch, *The Crimea and Odessa,* 255.

101. V. A. Iakovlev, "Koe chto ob inoplemennikakh v istorii g. Odessy," in De-Ribas, *Iz proshlago Odessy,* 384.

102. De Voland, *Moia zhizn´ v Rossii,* 144.

103. *Odesskii vestnik,* October 3, 1834.

104. Proctor, *A Russian Journey,* 274.

105. Pinkerton, *Russia,* 135.

106. Sicard, *Lettres sur Odessa,* 59.

107. Brooks, *The Russians of the South,* 32.

108. Morton, *Travels in Russia,* 177.

109. Vigel', *Zapiski,* 2:251.

110. Ibid.

111. Curtis, *Around the Black Sea,* 329.

112. Elliot, *Travels in the Three Great Empires,* 265.

113. Lyall, *Travels in Russia,* 162. Robert Lyall wrote these words in 1825. They were repeated almost verbatim five years later by Edward Morton, also a Briton. See Morton, *Travels in Russia,* 186.

114. Kohl, *Russia,* 423.

115. "*Oni kovarny, zlobny, mstitel´ny, nepostoiany, nadmenny, korystoliubimy bolee zhidov . . . vezde gnusnye obmany. . . . ,*" cited in Atlas, *Staraia Odessa,* 82.

116. Langeron, "Soobrazheniia gr. Lanzherona, 228.

117. De Voland, *Moia zhizn´ v Rossii,* 150.

118. Jones, *Travels,* 2:352.

119. Evans, *A la California,* 272.

120. See Zipperstein, *The Jews of Odessa;* and Orbach, *New Voices.*

121. On the debate over the "Jewish question" during the reign of Alexander II, see Klier, *Imperial Russia's Jewish Question.*

122. Tarnopol, *Notices historiques.* On Tarnopol, see also Zipperstein, *The Jews of Odessa,* 72–73; and Orbach, *New Voices,* 28–29.

123. Tarnopol, *Notices historiques,* 5–6.

124. Ibid., 19, 137, 8. Tarnopol's biography mirrors his image of Odessa's Jews: he grew up in a Hasidic household which he abandoned in 1828, and entered one of Odessa's "modern" Jewish schools to study languages and science.

125. Tarnopol presented statistics illustrating the commercial success of Odessa's Jews. He also sought to demonstrate their intellectual achievements by listing the names of prominent writers and the many languages (Hebrew, Russian, German, French, and Italian) in which they published. Ibid., 182–183.

126. For a biography of Rabinovich and the history of *Rassvet,* see Zipperstein, *The Jews of Odessa,* 97–107; and Orbach, *New Voices,* chap. 2. A copy of the newspaper's program outlining its objectives can be found in Belousova and Volkova, *Evrei Odessy i iuga Ukrainy,* 122.

127. The San Francisco gold rush began in 1849. Rabinovich compared the two places in 1860.

128. Rabinovich, "Odessa," 1–2.

129. Ibid. Rabinovich uses a Russianized version of the word *gehenem,* which is Yiddish for "hell." The word originally derived from biblical Hebrew, and subsequently found its way into ancient Greek and Latin.

130. Ibid., 2.

131. Osip Rabinovich, "Morits Sefardi," in Rabinovich, *Sochineniia.*

132. Ibid., 288.

133. Ibid., 339. As subsequent chapters will show, the Russian word *roskosh',* which means luxury or splendor, is used more than any other word to describe the splendor of Odessa.

134. Ibid., 291, 353.

135. Mendele Mokher Sforim wrote several versions of *Fishke the Lame,* and the most famous and most often cited was the 1888 version. The writings that form Sholem Aleichem's *Letters of Menakhem-Mendl and Sheyne-Sheyndl* were written at different times and published serially. The episodes that take place in Odessa were first published in 1892.

136. Rabinovich, "Istoriia," 39.

137. Ibid., 57.

138. Ibid., 59.

139. Sholem Aleichem, *The Letters of Menakhem-Mendl,* 3.

140. Ibid., 3–4. The Yiddish quotation can be found in Sholem Aleichem, *Menakhem-Mendl,* 35.

141. S. Y. Abramovich, "Fishke the Lame," in Zukerman, Stillman, and Herbst, *Selected Works of Mendele Mokher Sforim,* 292. The "new-fangled Cabbalists with shaven faces" whom Fishke encounters are probably maskilim, but as an uneducated beggar, he would know little of their existence.

142. Sholem Aleichem, *The Letters of Menakhem-Mendl,* 7.

143. Ibid., 10.

144. Abramovich, "Fishke the Lame," 292.

145. Ibid., 292–293.

146. Sholem Aleichem, *The Letters of Menakhem-Mendl,* 11.

147. Abramovich, "Fishke the Lame," 296. According to traditional Jewish customs, dancing with the Torah is only practiced on *Simchah Torah,* the autumnal holiday that celebrates the annual completion of its reading.

148. Rabinovich, "Istoriia," 82–83.

149. Abramovich, "Fishke the Lame," 294.

150. Ibid., 294–295; The Yiddish quotation can be found in Abramovich, *Ale verk fun Mendele Mokher-Sforim,* 163.

151. Abramovich, "Fishke the Lame," 296.

152. Closely related to kvetching, the Yiddish curse (*klole*) is infamous for its intricacy and its multilayered paradoxes. Yiddish curses, like Yiddish complements, almost always begin with the phrase "may you" (*zolstu*), and even the most astute listener may not be quick enough to foretell an impending curse, since many Yiddish curses contain unexpected inversions; what begins as a complement is quickly converted into an insult. See Wex, *Born to Kvetch,* chap. 6; Singer, *May You . . . How to Curse in Yiddish;* Kumove, *Words Like Arrows,* 55–62.

153. Sholem Aleichem, *The Letters of Menakhem-Mendl,* 9, 12; Sholem Aleichem, *Menakhem-Mendl: 60 briv,* 52.

154. Sholem Aleichem, *The Letters of Menakhem-Mendl,* 14; Sholem Aleichem, *Menakhem-Mendl: 60 briv,* 61, 62.

155. Sholem Aleichem, *The Letters of Menakhem-Mendl,* 9. Sholem Aleichem's Tevye the Dairyman makes passing reference to Sheyne-Sheyndl's domineering character, when Tevye enters a business deal with Menakhem-Mendl, who is his cousin. Tevye remarks

to Menakhem-Mendl that "there's one thing I don't get though: if I know your wife as I think I do, how does she let you run around loose like this without coming after you on a broomstick?" Sholem Aleichem, "Tevye Blows a Small Fortune," in Sholem Aleichem, *Tevye the Dairyman,* 27.

156. Rabinovich, "Istoriia," 9. *Iikhes* is a Yiddish word that means lineage or pedigree.

157. Sholem Aleichem, *The Letters of Menakhem-Mendl,* 16.

158. Ibid., 102.

159. Ibid., 40.

160. Ibid., 33.

161. Kumove, *Words Like Arrows,* 196.

162. Rabinovich, "Istoriia," 8.

163. Ibid., 8, 11. *Chtob* is the Russian word generally used as the equivalent of the Yiddish *zol,* the opening word for the classic Yiddish curse.

164. John D. Klier, "A Port, Not a Shtetl: Reflections on the Distinctiveness of Odessa," in Cesarini, *Port Jews,* 175.

2. Crafting Old Odessa

1. Arkadii Averchenko, "Odessa," in Gavrilov and Golubovskii, *Est´ gorod u moria,* 323–324.

2. Herlihy, *Odessa,* 234.

3. Ibid., 242.

4. Weinberg, *The Revolution,* 6.

5. Ibid., chap. 7.

6. Ibid., 15.

7. Ibid., 49.

8. That Odessa experienced pogroms earlier than most other cities in Russia lends credence to this thesis, given that Odessa had many of the attributes we associate with modernization before other towns in the Pale of Settlement, including rapid urbanization, social mobility, a secularized intelligentsia and population, and greater interethnic communication in industry. On Russia's pogroms in general, see Aronson, *Troubled Waters;* and Klier and Lambroza, *Pogroms.* On the pogroms in Odessa prior to 1905, see Herlihy, *Odessa,* 299–304; and Zipperstein, *The Jews of Odessa,* chap. 5.

9. Robert Weinberg, "The Pogrom of 1905 in Odessa: A Case Study," in Klier and Lambroza, *Pogroms,* 248. The Kishinev pogrom of 1903, which utterly shocked world Jewry and compelled Jews in the Pale to create self-defense forces, resulted in forty-seven deaths. See Shlomo Lambroza, "The Pogroms of 1903–1906," in Klier and Lambroza, *Pogroms,* 200.

10. Weinberg, *The Revolution,* chap. 7; Herlihy, *Odessa,* 304–308; Lambroza, "The Pogroms of 1903–1906." For eyewitness accounts of the 1905 pogrom, see *Odesskii pogrom i samooborona.* On the Revolution of 1905 in general and the October Manifesto, see Ascher, *The Revolution of 1905: Russia in Disarray*; and Ascher, *The Revolution of 1905: Authority Restored.*

11. On crime in Russia in the early twentieth century, see Engelstein, *The Keys to Happiness.* On St. Petersburg specifically, see Neuburger, *Hooliganism.* On prostitution, see Bernstein, *Sonia's Daughters.*

12. Belousova and Volkova, *Evrei Odessy i iuga Ukrainy,* 161–164.

13. Ibid., 164–165. Between 1880 and the end of World War I, one-third of East European Jewry left their countries of origin, with the majority coming from the Russian Empire. Over 85 percent settled in the United States. See Sorin, *A Time for Building,* chap. 1.

14. Kotler, *Ocherki,* 21. Kotler maintains that most of these crimes were economic in nature. In 1880 there were 55,300 Jews in Odessa out of a total population of 219,300. See Herlihy, *Odessa,* 251. Kotler's figures do not take into account Muslims and members of other religions. In 1881, however, Muslims only made up .13 percent of Odessa's population. See Polishchuk, *Evrei Odessy,* 343.

15. Gerasimov compiled his data from police reports rather than court cases, since many (if not most) incidents never made it to trial. He maintains that official statistics only record those cases that came before the court, and, according to these figures, Jews were not disproportionately involved in crime. In fact, the percentage of Jewish criminals in Odessa was lower than their total share of the population. Moreover, crime rates involving Jewish offenders who appeared in court were actually higher in Warsaw and Kiev than in Odessa. See Gerasimov, "'My ubivaem tol'ko svoikh'," 213–215.

16. For some examples, see *Odesskaia pochta,* January 15, 1909; January 26, 1909; March 19, 1909; June 11, 1909; and June 29, 1909.

17. That there were a handful of German communities near Odessa in Kherson Province further complicates efforts to identify a person's ethnicity based on his or her name, as Jewish names often resemble those of Germans.

18. See, for instance, GAOO, f. 635, op. 1, d. 64. This case involved Jews who were accused of robbing a store in 1907, possibly to fund a local anarchist movement.

19. Along with these reasons particular to Imperial Russia and the Jews are the many other more general qualifications, namely, to what extent are the crimes that were reported an accurate sampling of those committed overall? To what extent did newspaper reporters objectively report crimes and the names of those criminals, irrespective of ethnicity and religion? To what extent did the authorities objectively investigate crimes, irrespective of the ethnicity and religion of the accusers and the accused?

20. See, for instance, GAOO, f. 314, op. 2, d. 148, ll. 95–97, 104; f. 635, op. 1, d. 75; *Odesskaia pochta,* March 19, 1909, and July 28, 1912; and Lange, *Prestupnyi mir,* 25–26.

21. In his study on Jews in Georgian England, Todd Endelman has shown that counterfeiting was among the most common crimes committed by English Jews. See Endelman, *The Jews of Georgian England,* 207.

22. See, for instance, *Odesskaia pochta,* July 28, 1912.

23. On March 23, 1913, *Odesskaia pochta* reported the arrest in Constantinople of Berkovich, Odessa's "King of the Pickpockets" (*Korol′ karmannikov*). In his memoirs, the criminal investigator V. V. Lange provides a list of well-known pickpockets in Odessa. Half of them have obvious Jewish names. See Lange, *Prestupnyi mir,* 21.

24. Lange, *Prestupnyi mir,* 34–35.

25. See, for instance, *Odesskaia pochta,* January 26, 1909; June 11, 1909; and June 29, 1909. White slave traders who were not Jewish were rarely reported. This, of course, does not mean that they did not exist. But available evidence suggests that this was an area of criminal activity in which the Jews predominated.

26. See Glickman, *The Jewish White Slave Trade;* Fried, *The Rise and Fall of the Jewish Gangster in America,* chap. 1. Laura Engelstein maintains that, by the early twentieth century, the idea of the Jewish trafficker in women had become an "anti-Semitism cliché." Although it is undoubtedly true that anti-Semites publicized this idea to criminalize the Jew, Jews unquestionably played a notorious role in this trade. See Engelstein, *The Keys to Happiness,* 304.

27. See, for instance, GAOO, f. 314, op. 1, d. 221, which documents a gang of Jewish robbers (*razboiniki*) who robbed a ship; and f. 313, op. 2, d. 148, which describes a group of Jewish extortionists who robbed somebody (also Jewish) in his apartment at gunpoint, threatening to kill him. Isaac Babel's Benia Krik is by far the most famous Jewish extortionist in Russian fiction.

28. Il'ia Gerasimov maintains that Jews were heavily involved in violent crimes, including murder, but Jews for the most part only killed other Jews, rarely crossing ethnic boundaries to murder Gentiles. See Gerasimov, "'My ubivaem tol'ko svoikh'," 254. *Odesskaia pochta,* however, rarely, reported murders where the perpetrator was Jewish, and, when reported, such crimes appear to have been a product of domestic violence. See, for instance, *Odesskaia pochta,* November 26, 1914. This, of course, does not mean that Jews did not commit murder. Many reported murder cases remained unsolved, and *Odesskaia pochta* did not necessarily report every murder that took place.

29. Weissman-Joselit, *Our Gang,* 32. In America, Jews were also heavily involved in committing arson for insurance fraud to such an extent that such crimes were referred to as "Jewish lightning." Insurance companies often refused to insure people with names ending in "sky" or "ski." See Weissman-Joselit, *Our Gang,* 36–37. The extent of arson committed by Jews in Odessa remains unclear, although Isaac Babel memorably depicted Benia Krik's men burning down the local police station.

30. The most comprehensive Russian criminal slang dictionary is M. A. Grachev's *Slovar´ tysiacheletnego russkogo argo.* To get a sense of how thieves' cant in Russia has evolved over time, see Vladimir Kozlovskii's four-volume *Sobranie russkikh vorovskikh slovarei,* which includes reproductions of different dictionaries published throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Criminal slang of Jewish origin also figures prominently in Odessa's press, various memoirs, and detective fiction produced during this era. See, for instance, Lange, *Prestupnyi mir;* Grigorii Breitman, "Dragotsennosti grafini Vendbol'skii," in Breitman, *Drama v chugunnom kotle i drugie rasskazy.* See also Straten, "Argo i argotizmy," 111–147; von Timroth, *Russian and Soviet Sociolinguistics.*

31. In the introduction to this volume we saw how Germans, beginning with Martin Luther, produced dictionaries of thieves' cant (*Gaunersprache*) which prominently featured words of Hebraic and Yiddish origin. These dictionaries (particularly in Luther's case) harbored the anti-Semitic intent of criminalizing the Jew. Such blatant anti-Semitism is not present in the Russian sources, although the possibility that words of Jewish origin were disproportionately favored for inclusion cannot be ruled out.

32. Lange uses this term in his memoirs. See Lange, *Prestupnyi mir,* 19. Aleksandr Kuprin provides a detailed description of the *marovikher* and his activities. See Kuprin, "Vor," in Kuprin, *Sobranie sochinenii,* 1:405–406. There is a famous Yiddish folk song titled "Avreml der marovikher" ("Avreml the Pickpocket") written by Mordechai Gebirtig.

33. *Khispesnichestvo* was a common crime in Odessa in the early twentieth century. For examples, see *Odesskaia pochta,* October 1, 1911; and March 4, 1912. For a full description of how this crime was perpetrated, see Sylvester, *Tales of Old Odessa,* 94–95.

34. For examples of this term in an Odessan source from this period, see Breitman, "Dragotsennosti grafini Vendbol'skii," 296.

35. Lange uses this term specifically with respect to false passports, although the word was used more generally for other documents in criminal argot. See Lange, *Prestupnyi mir,* 38. In modern Hebrew *kasav* is pronounced *katav.*

36. See, for instance, *Odesskaia pochta,* March 15, 1914.

37. For a biography of Iushkevich and a detailed analysis of his literary works, see Rischin, "Semen Iushkevich."

38. See, for instance, Iushkevich's 1911 short story "Ulitsa" ("The Street"), in Iushkevich, *Ulitsa: rasskazy;* and his play *V gorode,* which is available in English as *In the City,* in Iushkevich, *In the City,* 99–174. *V gorode* was originally published in Russian in 1906.

39. Iushkevich wrote and published *Leon Drei* in three installments: in 1908, 1913, and then as a complete novel in 1922. According to Ruth Rischin, he completed writing the novel in 1917. For a full summary of the novel's plot, see Rischin, "Semen Iushkevich," 367–371.

40. See Rischin, "Semen Iushkevich," 370.

41. Leon Drei's Jewishness is discussed later in this chapter. To cite one example here: he is obsessed with pleasing his mother, who, like the stereotypical Jewish mother in Ashkenazi culture, is both domineering and smothering of her son.

42. For a biography of Kuprin, see Luker, *Alexander Kuprin.*

43. Joshua Kunitz suggests that Aleksandr Kuprin was the first significant Russian writer to present nuanced depictions of Russia's Jews, including in his stories strong, weak, beautiful, noble, and reprehensible characters. See Kunitz, *Russian Literature and the Jew,* 152–156.

44. Kuprin, "Gambrinus" (1906), in Kuprin, *Gambrinus and Other Stories.* The Russian text can be found in Kuprin, *Sobranie sochinenii,* Vol. 4.

45. Kuprin, "Trus." Kuprin wrote "Trus" ("The Coward") in 1902.

46. Kuprin, *Iama [The Pit]. Iama* was originally published in Russian in installments between 1905 and 1915. The book does contain one notorious Jewish pimp who shares much in common with Leon Drei. He is discussed later in this chapter.

47. Brooks, *When Russia Learned To Read,* chap. 5.

48. See, in particular, Breitman, "Dragotsennosti grafini Vendbol'skii." For a biography of Breitman, see Kamennyi, *Odessa—kto est´ kto,* 122. During the first decade of the twentieth century a few Russian writers crafted their own Sherlock Holmes stories, with the British detective solving cases in various Russian cities, including Odessa. See Brooks, *When Russia Learned To Read,* 116, 141–146; Auswaks, *Sherlock Holmes in Russia.*

49. Son'ka Zolotaia Ruchka was the nickname of Sof'ia Bliuvshtein, an actual nineteenth-century Russian Jewish criminal. Her biography remains shrouded in mystery. For fictional accounts of her life from this era, see R. L. Antropov, "Zolotaia Ruchka," in Antropov, *Syshchik Sankt-Peterburgskoi politsii;* and Amori, *Son´ka Zolotaia Ruchka.* Also see the story published serially in *Odesskaia pochta,* between July 29, 1913, and October 25, 1913.

50. See McReynolds, *The News under Russia's Old Regime.*

51. Sylvester, *Tales of Old Odessa,* 5–6.

52. The estimate on *Odesskie novosti*'s staff comes from an exhibit at the Odessa Jewish Museum. On Jabotinsky, see Sokolianskii, *Konechno v Odesse.*

53. Sylvester, *Tales of Old Odessa,* 6.

54. Ibid.

55. Ibid., 42. For a biography of Finkel', see Kamennyi, *Odessa,* 130.

56. Sylvester, *Tales of Old Odessa,* 42. See also Sylvester, "Crime, Masquerade, and Anxiety," 245–246.

57. The de facto editors of Odessa's *Krokodil* were Boris Flit and Fedor Segal'. Contributors included Emil' Krotkii (real name German), Lazar' Mitnitskii, S. Fanzini (the pseudonym of Il'ia Il'f's brother, Aleksandr Fainzel'berg), and Semen Kesel'man. Many

of these writers, who were predominantly Odessan Jews, went on to work in humor publications in Moscow and St. Petersburg (Leningrad) after the Revolution. See Lushchik, "Odesskii 'Krokodil,'" 254–264.

58. It is difficult to conclude with any certainty why prerevolutionary Odessans would have been pleased with their city's reputation. Odessans today boast of their city's notoriety because it adds color to its history. The myth gives contemporary Odessa a local identity that (Odessans claim) was not destroyed by war, revolution, economic collapse, and, most recently, a pervasive sense of post-Soviet malaise. Although Odessa's residents insist that their forebears always possessed such pride, our only evidence comes from the mythmakers themselves.

59. Deribas, *Staraia Odessa,* 11. The essays in Deribas's volume were originally published in Odessa's local press in the 1910s.

60. Iushkevich, *Leon Drei,* 105.

61. Ibid., 279–280.

62. The trope of lobster as transgression subsequently surfaced in American Jewish humor. There is a memorable scene in Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* where the protagonist's mother becomes distressed and incessantly vomits upon learning she unwittingly consumed lobster. Roth humorously maintains that "even in the Chinese restaurant, where the Lord has lifted the ban on pork dishes for the obedient children of Israel, the eating of lobster Cantonese is considered by God (Whose mouthpiece on earth, in matters pertaining to food, is my Mom) to be totally out of the question." Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint,* 92–94. In one episode of the television series *Seinfeld,* a Jewish woman sneaks into the kitchen in the middle of the night to indulge in the irresistible temptation to try lobster, but Kramer talks her out of it. The next day she thanks Kramer for having "saved" her. *Seinfeld,* "The Hamptons," episode no. 85.

63. *Odesskaia pochta,* August 6, 1912.

64. Ibid., March 1, 1913.

65. Iushkevich, *Leon Drei,* 42.

66. Petr Pil'skii, "Liki gorodov," in Gavrilov and Golubovskii, *Est' gorod u moria,* 330. Pil'skii wrote this piece in 1911.

67. Averchenko, "Odessa," 325–326.

68. Adler, *A Life on Stage,* 29. Adler originally wrote his memoirs in Yiddish; they were serialized in the socialist Yiddish newspaper *Die varheyt* (published in New York) between 1916 and 1919.

69. Iushkevich, *Ulitsa,* 39.

70. Pil'skii, "Liki gorodov," 331.

71. "Odessa Nights" is the title of a chapter in Adler's memoirs.

72. Kuprin, "Gambrinus," in Kuprin, *Gambrinus and Other Stories,* 19.

73. *Odesskaia pochta,* August 11, 1911.

74. Adler, *A Life on Stage,* 20.

75. Ibid., 21.

76. Ibid., 22.

77. *Odesskaia pochta,* June 23, 1910.

78. In present-day America the word "goy" is generally considered derogatory.

79. On the Wise Men of Chelm, see Simon, *The Wise Men of Helm;* Ausubel, *A Treasury of Jewish Folklore,* 326–342. On Hershele Ostropolier, see Ausubel, *A Treasury of Jewish Folklore,* 304–319; and Stern, *Hershele.*

80. *Krokodil* (Odessa), June 24, 1911, 3.

81. Reprinted in Shchurova, *Odesskii zhurnal "Krokodil,"* 18–19.

82. Ibid., 76.

83. Adler, *A Life on Stage,* 40.

84. Ibid., 39.

85. Iushkevich, *Leon Drei,* 152.

86. Kuprin, "An Insult,," 217; Aleksandr Kuprin, "Obida," in Kuprin, *Sobranie sochinenii,* 4:292. Kuprin wrote this story in 1906.

87. Kuprin, "An Insult," 228; Kuprin, "Obida," 299.

88. *Odesskaia pochta,* April 3, 1914.

89. Lange, *Prestupnyi mir,* 61. Lange does not stress any sort of connection between his characters' being Jewish, cardsharps, and educated. However, he lists the names of the most infamous cardsharps, half of whom have obvious Jewish names with many others having names that are likely (but not definitely) Jewish.

90. Kuprin, "An Insult," 225.

91. *Odesskaia pochta,* September 4, 1909. For more on Freidenberg, see Sylvester, *Tales of Old Odessa,* 58–60.

92. *Odesskaia pochta,* October 4, 1909.

93. Kuprin, "An Insult," 216–217, 232.

94. Jews in Odessa did, in fact, form self-defense forces during this time, in the aftermath of the bloody 1903 pogrom in Kishinev. See *Odesskii pogrom i samooborona;* Belousova and Volkova, *Evrei Odessy i iuga Ukrainy,* 147–149.

95. Lange, *Prestupnyi mir,* 62.

96. GAOO, f. 635, op. 1, d. 285, l. 5.

97. GAOO, f. 635, op. 1, d. 285, l. 155.

98. Lange, *Prestupnyi mir,* 39–40.

99. Breitman, "Dragotsennosti grafini Vendbol'skii," 317. Motl is a great example of a Jewish criminal whose speech is infused with criminal slang of Yiddish origin. See pages 314–319.

100. Ibid., 319.

101. Kuprin, *The Pit,* 163.

102. Ibid., 167.

103. Ibid., 165, 167.

104. Ibid., 167.

105. Ibid.

106. *Odesskaia pochta,* December 14, 1914.

107. Olsvanger, *Royte pomerantsen,* 96–97.

108. Iushkevich, *Leon Drei,* 74–75.

109. Ibid., 75.

110. Ibid., 75, 249.

111. Ibid., 374, 99.

112. *Odesskaia pochta* published the serial between July 29, 1913, and October 25, 1913. The episodes in which Klots appears were published on August 26, August 30, August 31, September 3, and September 5.

113. *Odesskaia pochta,* April 4, 1910.

114. "Klezmer" is Yiddish for musician, originally derived from the Hebrew words *klei zemer,* which means "a vessel of music."

115. Slobin, *Tenement Songs,* 15–16; Sapoznik, *Klezmer!,* 14–15; Rubin, *Voices of a People.*

116. Kuprin, "Gambrinus." in Kuprin, *Gambrinus and Other Stories.* Kuprin allegedly based Sashka on a real prototype, a fiddler named Shendel' Pevzner, who lived from 1866 until 1954. See Kamennyi, *Odessa,* 197.

117. Kuprin, "Gambrinus," in Kuprin, *Sobranie sochinenii,* 4:340.

118. Kuprin, "Gambrinus," in Kuprin, *Gambrinus and Other Stories,* 26–27.

119. Ibid., 36–37.

120. Ibid., 42.

121. Ibid., 33.

122. Mark Zborowski and Elizabeth Herzog, *Life Is with People,* 270.

123. Ibid., 284.

124. The only occasion in traditional Jewish culture when drunkenness is acceptable (even encouraged) is Purim. On Purim and its place in Jewish history and culture, see Horowitz, *Reckless Rites.*

125. Iushkevich, *Leon Drei,* 384.

126. Ibid., 387–388. Circular dancing, known as the horah, is a customary ritual at traditional Jewish weddings and is often the climax of the festivities.

127. *Odesskaia pochta,* September 28, 1911.

128. Ibid.

129. Vigel', *Zapiski,* 2:250.

130. Zelenetskoi, *O russkom iazyke.*

131. So, for example, *arBUZ* (watermelon) became *ARbuz, zaKON* (law) became *ZAkon,* and so on. Zelenetskoi, *O russkom iazyke,* 11–15.

132. French and Italian expressions were often Russified in a way that preserved their original syntax. For instance, the French expression *c'est quelque chose d'interessant* was directly rendered into Russian as *eto chto-nibud' zanimatel'nogo,* rather than the more grammatically correct *eto chto-to zanimatel'noe.* For more examples, see Zelenetskoi, *O russkom iazyke,* 16–18, 28–29.

133. For example, the Russian word for "guilty" (*vinovat*) took on the meaning "to owe." "You owe me five rubles" was thus rendered as *ty mne vinovat piat' rublei* rather than *ty dolzhen mne piat' rublei.* Zelenetskoi, *O russkom iazyke,* 18–20.

134. This was particularly the case with the use of prepositions. For instance, the phrase "I am asking you" was not rendered as *ia sprashivaiu vas* as it should have been but rather as *ia vam sprashivaiu,* which may be loosely translated as "I am asking to you." Zelenetskoi, *O russkom iazyke,* 23.

135. The essay was called "Odesskii iazyk." It was a chapter included in his book, *Odessa, Odessity i Odessitki: ocherki, nabroski i ekskizy.* Although Doroshevich originally published his essays on Odessa in the last decade of the nineteenth century, he has more in common with the mythmakers of the early twentieth century—Iushkevich, Averchenko, and Kuprin—than he does with the previous generation of mythmakers because of his focus on the Odessit and *odesskii iazyk.*

136. Ibid., 53, 61.

137. Ibid., 61.

138. Ibid., 48. In this passage Doroshevich is poking fun at the Odessit's penchant for mixing up Russian declensions. Given that English does not have cases, translating such examples does not capture their richness.

139. Ibid., 51–52.

140. Ibid., 57.

141. Averchenko, "Odessa," 329.

142. *Odesskaia pochta,* January 23, 1911. The Yiddish expressions are italicized for emphasis.

143. Faust did mention that the two cavaliers were from the Moldavanka, which is in itself a marker of Jewishness since the district was inhabited primarily by Jews. Nevertheless his piece is titled "Odesskii iazyk," not "Moldavankskii iazyk," which implies that their speech was representative of all Odessans.

144. Doroshevich, "Odesskii iazyk," 57.

145. *Odesskaia pochta,* June 7, 1911; and June 8, 1911.

146. *Krokodil* (Odessa), January 1912, 4. Most of the definitions in this mini-dictionary were written in Latin script. In the interest of clarity, I have selectively altered their spelling to accord with proper transliteration.

147. Unfortunately there are few historical surveys of Odessa during this period. Tanja Penter's *Odessa 1917* is an excellent social history of the Bolshevik Revolution, but it only covers 1917, not the civil war era. Studies by Soviet historians focus on the triumph of Bolshevism and little else. See, for instance, Konovalov, *Geroi odesskogo podpolia.* Igor' Shkliaev's *Odessa v smutnoe vremia* is the best of the few post-Soviet works containing a series of essays on the city during the civil war. For an overview of Odessa's cultural life during this period, see Alena Iavorskaia, "Nad morem Chernym i glukhim . . . ," in Taubenshlak and Iavorska, *Gde obryvaetsia Rossiia.* On Ukrainian Jewry during the Revolution and the civil war, see Abramson, *A Prayer for Government.*

148. For a list of Odessa's short-lived governments, see Taubenshlak and Iavorska, *Gde obryvaetsia Rossiia,* 21.

149. Odessa's population had already endured some hardship during World War I, but unlike the northern areas of the Pale of Settlement—where Jewish communities experienced unprecedented suffering—the city was largely removed from the theaters of battle. Some Jewish refugees from parts of Romania and Poland fled the fighting and sought sanctuary in Odessa. See Borovoi, *Vospominaniia,* 70, and a sorrowful article in *Odesskaia pochta,* published on December 12, 1914. Yet, on another occasion, Faust used his column to describe the persistence of gaiety among Odessans, who continued to laugh, smile, and seek merriment, despite the war. See *Odesskaia pochta,* November 10, 1914.

150. Odessa's archive contains few documents relating to criminal activity during this period. But an analysis of *Odesskaia pochta* clearly demonstrates a marked increase in crime.

151. *Odesskaia pochta,* January 28, 1919.

152. Ibid., April 9, 1917.

153. *Odesskaia pochta,* evening edition, January 24, 1919.

154. Sketching Iaponchik's biography is a difficult task, as there are few reliable sources. Although many memoirs discuss Iaponchik at length, these works were largely written decades later and clearly bear the influence of Isaac Babel's *Odessa Stories,* which were written in the 1920s. These memoirs say more about the Odessa myth during the Soviet period than they do about Iaponchik's biography and, accordingly, are examined in subsequent chapters. There are only a handful of biographical essays on Iaponchik's life, which seek to separate the man from the myth. See Shkliaev, "Mishka Iaponchik"; and V. Savchenko, "Mishka Iaponchik—'korol'' odesskikh banditov," in Savchenko, *Avantiuristy grazhdanskoi voiny.* In English, Boris Briker's "The Underworld of Benya Krik" contains a brief biography of Iaponchik, but it relies heavily on memoirs that bear the influence of Babel's stories. See Briker, "The Underworld of Benya Krik," 115–134.

155. Shkliaev, "Mishka Iaponchik," 18; Savchenko, "Mishka Iaponchik," 129–130.

156. Savchenko, "Mishka Iaponchik," 130.

157. Ibid., 139.

158. Miasoedovskaia Street was renamed Sholem Aleichem Street during the Soviet era.

159. Mishka Iaponchik's letter, "Pis'mo v redaktsiiu," can be found in Margulies, *Ognennye gody,* 179–182.

160. Ibid., 182.

161. Ibid., 180. It is unclear whether Iaponchik was involved with the *Evreiskaia boevaia druzhina.* Such a paramilitary organization did, in fact, exist and, according to the historian Igal Kotler, successfully defended Jews from the threat of pogroms. Consequently, practically no pogroms took place in Odessa during the civil war. See Kotler, *Ocherki,* 30. See also T'homi, *Between Darkness & Dawn.* T'homi was a young Zionist active in Odessa during the civil war. He discusses at length Iaponchik's defense of Jews. T'homi, however, never met Iaponchik, and his depiction of the gangster is largely based on rumors.

162. Iaponchik, "Pis'mo v redaktsiiu," 180.

163. Ibid., 182.

164. Fedor Fomin, a commander in Odessa's branch of the Cheka, described in his memoirs his negotiations with Iaponchik over the formation of his division. However, he wrote his memoirs in the 1960s and they clearly bear the influence of Isaac Babel's *Odessa Stories.* See chapter 4, this volume, for more on Fomin's depiction of Iaponchik. See also Fomin's *Zapiski starogo chekista.*

165. Shkliaev, "Mishka Iaponchik," 25.

166. See ibid., 26–29; Savchenko, "Mishka Iaponchik," 153–157. These authors, however, rely heavily on memoirs in reconstructing Iaponchik's life and fate. Their accuracy is open to question. Shkliaev, a professional historian, does offer several competing versions of Iaponchik's fate.

167. Alena Iavorskaia puts forth this argument, suggesting that the anarchic conditions in Odessa furnished cultural figures with greater creative freedom than they would have enjoyed under the Bolsheviks in Petrograd and Moscow. Among those who spent part of the civil war era in Odessa were Ivan Bunin, Aleksei Tolstoi, Teffi, Don-Aminado, Vladimir Narbut, and Konstantin Paustovskii. In addition to these sojourners were Odessa's "indigenous" mythmakers, which included, Leonid Utesov, Il'ia Il'f, Evgenii Petrov, and Valentin Kataev. See Iavorskaia, "Nad morem Chernym i glukhim," 3–19.

168. G. A. Gessenshtein, "Vpechatleniia avstriiskogo ofitsera ob Odesse," in Taubenshlak and Iavorska, *Gde obryvaetsia Rossiia,* 43.

169. Don-Aminado, "Poezd na tret'em puti," in Taubenshlak and Iavorska, *Gde obryvaetsia Rossiia,* 353.

170. All in all, *Pero v spinu* produced just over a dozen issues, all published in 1919. The chief editor was V. V. Klopatovskii.

171. Son'ka Zolotaia Ruchka was active in Odessa during the second half of the nineteenth century. Kol'ka Iaponchik (no relation to Mishka Iaponchik) was arrested in February 1919; see *Odesskaia pochta,* February 15, 1919.

172. *Pero v spinu,* no. 10 (n.d.): 1. *Limonka* is thieves' argot for a prostitute; *Malina* is thieves' argot for a den of criminals. See Grachev, *Slovar'.*

173. *Pero v spinu,* no. 3 (n.d.): 4. In the 1910s Odessa's newspapers regularly included classified ads from robbery victims, imploring the thieves who robbed them to return certain items of sentimental value.

174. *Pero v spinu,* no. 2 (n.d.): 4.
175. *Odesskaia pochta,* January 28, 1919.
176. *Bulbe* is Yiddish for potato.

3. The Battle for Old Odessa

1. Kotler, *Ocherki,* 32.
2. On the impact of Soviet nationality policy on the Jews and Jewish culture, see Gitelman, *Jewish Nationality and Soviet Politics;* and Sloin, "Pale Fire." On Soviet Jewish culture during the interwar era, see Shneer, *Yiddish and the Creation of Soviet Jewish Culture;* and Shternshis, *Soviet and Kosher.*
3. Kotler, *Ocherki,* 31.
4. Ibid., 34; Kozerod, *Perelomnye gody,* 108. On Moscow's Yiddish theater, see Veidlinger, *The Moscow State Yiddish Theater.*
5. Altshuler, *Soviet Jewry on the Eve of the Holocaust,* 225.
6. Ibid.
7. In 1939 the Jews numbered 224,236 (26 percent of the total population) in Kiev, 250,181 (6 percent of the total population) in Moscow, and 201,542 (6.3 percent of the total population) in Leningrad. Ibid., 225, 220.
8. On the New Economic Policy and the individuals who engaged in the "private sector," see Ball, *Russia's Last Capitalists;* and Hessler, *A Social History of Soviet Trade.*
9. There was, to be sure, a growing Jewish proletariat throughout much of the Pale of Settlement in the final decades of tsarist rule. Anti-Jewish legislation and a changing economy increasingly pushed the Jews out of their traditional occupations, and the onset of industrialization offered new opportunities in the factory. See Mendelsohn, *Class Struggle in the Pale.* On Odessa's Jewish proletariat, see Weinberg, *The Revolution,* chap. 2.
10. Ball, *Russia's Last Capitalists,* 99–100; Gitelman, *Jewish Nationality and Soviet Politics,* 354. According to the 1926 census, there were 1,574,411 Jews in Ukraine, 5.4 percent of the total population. See Altshuler, *Soviet Jewry on the Eve of the Holocaust,* 221.
11. GAOO, f. R-2138, op. 1, d. 60, l. 361.
12. *Vechernie izvestiia,* February 17, 1927.
13. *Odesskii kommunist,* February 20, 1920; *Vechernie izvestiia,* May 26, 1923; *Vechernie izvestiia,* July 21, 1923.
14. See, for instance, GAOO, f. R-1552, op. 2, d. 3520; f. R-1774, op. 1, d. 144; f. R-1774, op. 1, d. 415. Alan Ball insists that much of the contraband (sugar, tea, medicine, narcotics, etc.) that entered the Soviet Union came across the western border. Consequently, in 1923, the government established the Central Commission in the Struggle against Contraband. Jews who had emigrated, according to Ball, often sent contraband goods back to relatives in the USSR through the American Relief Organization (ARA). See Ball, *Russia's Last Capitalists,* 122–124.
15. Jewish refugees from Romania had crossed over into Odessa during the First World War in 1916 and again after the February Revolution in 1917. See Borovoi, *Vospominaniia,* 70.
16. See, for instance, GAOO, f. R-1774, op. 1, d. 524; f. R-1774, op. 1, d. 545.
17. See, for instance, *Odesskii kommunist,* April 28, 1920.
18. Slezkine, *The Jewish Century,* 222–224; Levin, *The Jews of the Soviet Union,* 2:47.
19. GAOO, f. R-1522, op. 2, d. 387.
20. GAOO, f. R-1774, op. 1, d. 545, ll. 13, 17.

21. The Jews were hardly the only ethnic community in the USSR to engage in corruption. Their presence was particularly conspicuous, however, because they gained employment in the state's bureaucracy in unprecedented numbers.

22. See, for instance, GAOO, f. R-2138, op. 1, d. 30, l. 198.

23. GAOO, f. R-1522, op. 2, d. 114.

24. Ibid., l. 131.

25. Ibid., l. 120.

26. For a brief biography of Naftalii Frenkel', see Kamennyi, *Odessa,* 268.

27. Isaac Babel left Odessa several times during the Revolution and the civil war. He briefly worked as a translator for the Cheka's counterintelligence department in Petrograd in 1918, served in a food requisitioning detachment in 1918–1919, and, most notably, as a war correspondent attached to Semen Budennyi's cavalry during the Russo-Polish War of 1920. See Gregory Freidin, "Isaac Emmanuelovich Babel: A Chronology," in Babel, *The Complete Works,* 1053. Lev Slavin served as a commander in the Red Army during the civil war, returning to Odessa in 1920. See Gordon, *Lev Slavin,* 5. Leonid Utesov went to Moscow in 1917, with a stopover in Gomel', where he won first place in a couplet competition. In Moscow he performed various skits at a restaurant called Ermitazh. Later that year he returned to Odessa, which remained his base until the end of the civil war. See Dmitriev, *Leonid Utesov,* 40–50.

28. Iavorskaia, "Nad morem chernym i glukhim," 3–4.

29. Ibid., 11. Aleksei Tolstoi subsequently returned to the Soviet Union in 1923, becoming a devoted supporter of the Soviet government.

30. Paustovskii wrote a number of stories in the early 1920s that are centered in Odessa, including "Etiketi dlia kolonial'nykh tovarov" and "Dochechka Bronia." Both can be found in Paustovskii, *Sobranie sochinenii.*

31. Gordon, *Lev Slavin,* 6. The first stories in Isaac Babel's *Odessa Stories* cycle, "The King," and "Justice in Parentheses," were published in *Moriak* in 1921. Babel, *The Complete Works,* 129.

32. Gordon, *Lev Slavin,* 6; Galanov, *Il´ia Il´f i Evgenii Petrov,* 17; T. Lishina, "Veselyi, golyi, khudoi," in Ostrogorskaia, *Vospominaniia ob Il´e Il´fe i Evgenii Petrove,* 73.

33. Babel, Slavin, Bagritskii, Gekht, and Il'f were Jewish; Olesha was of Polish descent; Paustovskii and Kataev were Russian.

34. Dmitriev, *Leonid Utesov,* 51; Vulis, *I. Il´f, E. Petrov,* 21–22; Gordon, *Lev Slavin,* 9.

35. Babel, *Sochineniia,* 1:238.

36. Cited in Lishina, "Veselyi, golyi, khudoi," 77.

37. Sergei Bondarin, "Milyi davnyi gody," in Ostrogorskaia, *Vospominaniia ob Il´e Il´fe i Evgenii Petrove,* 64.

38. *Vechernie izvestiia,* August 31, 1927.

39. *Bol´shevitskoe znamia,* January 10, 1938.

40. On *Gudok,* see Gordon, *Lev Slavin,* 9; Mikhail Shtikh, "V starom 'Gudke,'" in Ostrogorskaia, *Vospominaniia ob Il´e Il´fe i Evgenii Petrove.*

41. Gordon, *Lev Slavin,* 25.

42. Utesov, *Spasibo serdtse,* 170; Dmitriev, *Leonid Utesov,* 73.

43. On Jabotinsky and his time in Odessa, see Sokolianskii, *Konechno v Odesse;* Schechtman, *The Vladimir Jabotinsky Story,* vol. 1, chaps. 1–3; Katz, *Lone Wolf,* chaps. 1–8. Jabotinsky discusses the Jewish self-defense forces in his memoirs, *Povest´ moikh dnei,* 45–46. See also Dubnow, *Kniga zhizni,* 241–242.

44. Jabotinsky, *Piatero;* Jabotinsky, *The Five.*

45. T'homi, Don-Aminado, Morfessi, and Teffi all wrote memoirs: T'homi, *Between Darkness & Dawn;* Don-Aminado, *Poezd na tret'em puti;* Morfessi, *Zhizn', liubov', stsena: vospominaniia russkogo baiana;* and Teffi, *Nostal'giia: rasskazy, vospominaniia.*

46. On *Interventsiia,* see Golota, *Teatral'naia Odessa,* 5; *Zakat* debuted in Odessa in 1927. For a review of *Zakat,* see *Vechernie izvestiia,* October 28, 1927.

47. See, for instance, *Vechernie izvestiia,* May 14, 1923, which contains an excerpt from "Korol'"; and *Shkval,* no. 4 ([month and day not given], 1924), 4–6, which contains his story "Otets."

48. See, for instance, *Vechernie izvestiia,* May 26, 1923; *Vechernie izvestiia,* October 9, 1927; *Shkval,* no. 38 (September 25, 1926), 1–2; *Shkval,* no. 39 (October 2, 1926), [page number not given]; *Shkval,* no. 27 (June 30, 1928), 5–6.

49. On Soviet culture during NEP, see Stites, *Russian Popular Culture;* Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams;* Clark, *Petersburg;* Gorsuch, *Youth in Revolutionary Russia.*

50. See Naiman, *Sex in Public;* and David-Fox, *Revolution of the Mind.*

51. *Yidishe glikn* (*Jewish Luck*), directed by Aleksandr Granovskii (1925). For a discussion of this film, see Chernenko, *Krasnaia zvezda, zheltaia zvezda,* 20–21; Veidlinger, *The Moscow State Yiddish Theater,* 64–67.

52. On the history of Soviet jazz music, see Starr, *Red and Hot.*

53. On klezmer's influence on American jazz, see Hankus Netsky, "American Klezmer: A Brief History," in Slobin, *American Klezmer,* 13–14.

54. Ibid.; Idelsohn, *Jewish Music,* 379.

55. Utesov, *S pesnei po zhizni,* 34.

56. Utesov, *Gop so smykom: (repertuar 1929–1933),* compact disc, 1995. On criminal folksongs in the USSR, see Rothstein, "How It Was Sung in Odessa"; Straten, "Tvorchestvo gorodskoi ulitsy," 144–164. Lyrics to these and many other songs about Odessa can be found in: Grabovskii and Smirnov, *Poi, Odessa!;* Teplish, *Odessa.* "Gop so smykom" is the name of a legendary criminal from Odessa, who is also the narrator of the song. It is an idiomatic Odessan phrase that cannot be rendered into English with any precision. It has been variously translated as "Hop with a Fiddle Bow" and "Natural Born Thief," though neither is quite accurate. The thief was notorious for allegedly serenading wedding guests with his fiddle playing prior to robbing them. In Russian criminal slang, "gop-stop" connotes a robbery. See Grachev, *Slovar'.*

57. According to Utesov, Semen Iushkevich once stated that "Utesov speaks like I write." Although it is unclear whether Utesov actually heard Iushkevich utter these words, it suggests that Utesov sought to explicitly link his style to one of the most important mythmakers of the prerevolutionary era. See Utesov, *Zapiski aktera,* 47.

58. Starr, *Red and Hot,* 155.

59. *Time of Great Expectations* (*Vremia bol'shikh ozhidanii*) is the title of volume 4 of Konstantin Paustovskii's memoirs.

60. Lev Slavin, "Dva boitsa," in *Izbrannye proizvedeniia v dvukh tomakh,* 2:24.

61. Jabotinsky, *Povest',* 11.

62. Teffi, *Nostal'giia,* 353.

63. Utesov, *Prosti-proshchai,* 22.

64. Isaac Babel, "The King," in Babel, *The Complete Works,* 136; Isaac Babel, "The Father," in ibid., 164.

65. Morfessi, *Zhizn, liubov', stsena,* 132.

66. Ibid.

67. Isaac Babel, "Froim Grach," in Babel, *The Complete Works,* 173.

68. Isaac Babel, "How Things were Done in Odessa," in Babel, *The Complete Works,* 146.

69. Babel, "The King," 137.

70. Babel, "How Things were Done in Odessa," 151; Isaac Babel, "Kak eto delalos' v Odesse," in Babel, *Sochineniia,* 1:134.

71. Garvi, *Vospominaniia,* 240.

72. Isaac Babel, "The Tachanka Theory," in Babel, *The Complete Works,* 241.

73. Babel, *1920 Diary,* 94.

74. Isaac Babel, "The Rabbi," in Babel, *The Complete Works,* 234; Isaac Babel, "Justice in Parentheses," in ibid., 141.

75. Eduard Bagritskii, "Origin," in Shrayer, *Russian Poet / Soviet Jew,* 22.

76. Jabotinsky, *Povest',* 22.

77. Asch, *Mottke, the Thief,* 27.

78. Paustovskii, "Etiketi dlia kolonial'nykh tovarov," 320–321.

79. Dubnow, *Kniga zhizni,* 175.

80. Bagritskii, "Origin," 22.

81. Utesov, *Zapiski aktera,* 7.

82. *Vechernie izvestiia,* May 14, 1923.

83. Ibid.

84. Khmel'nitskii, *Vse khorosho prekrasnaia markiza!,* 7. Utesov recorded "Limonchiki" in the mid-1930s; it can be found on Utesov, *Sobranie luchshikh zapisei,* disc 1.

85. Don-Aminado, *Poezd na tret'em puti,* 47.

86. Dzhekobson and Dzhekobson, *Pesennyi fol'klor GULAGa kak istoricheskii istochnik (1917–1939),* 135. Curiously the variant that appears in *Interventsiia* refers to Kiev rather than the Moldavanka as having been captured by thieves, even though the play takes place in Odessa. See Slavin, *Interventsiia,* 93.

87. Alekseev (Nebutev), *Iz vospominanii levogo esera,* 43.

88. Teffi, *Nostal'giia,* 353.

89. Kozachinskii, *Zelenyi furgon,* 112.

90. Isaac Babel, "Gedali," in Babel, *The Complete Works,* 227.

91. Babel, "How Things were Done in Odessa," 151.

92. Babel, "The King," 134.

93. Teffi, *Nostal'giia,* 353.

94. Kozachinskii, *Zelenyi furgon,* 132–133.

95. Slavin, *Interventsiia,* 12–13.

96. Ibid., 17.

97. Babel, "How Things were Done in Odessa," 153.

98. Babel, "Justice in Parentheses," 145.

99. Babel, "How Things were Done in Odessa,"152. The Brodskii Synagogue was the first modern synagogue in Odessa to boast an organ. The cantor, Pinchas Minkovskii, was immensely popular because of his musical talent.

100. Jabotinsky, *The Five,* 73.

101. Jabotinsky, *Povest',* 43.

102. Ibid.

103. *Benia Krik,* directed by Vladimir Vil'ner (1926); Isaac Babel, "Benia Krik: A Treatment for a Film," in Babel, *The Complete Works,* 930.

104. Isaac Babel, "Liubka the Cossack," in Babel, *The Complete Works,* 156.

105. Ibid. The Baal Shem Tov was the founder of the Hasidic movement in the eighteenth century. See Rosman, *Founder of Hasidism.* In *Red Cavalry* Babel depicts the victimization and suffering of Hasidic Jews during the civil war. See Babel, "Gedali" and "The Rabbi." In placing a Hasidic text inside a brothel, Babel may also be implying that religion and prostitution are equally sinful in the eyes of Soviet Communism.

106. Babel, "How Things Were Done in Odessa," 151.

107. On Babel's Yiddish inflections, see also Cukierman, "The Odessa School of Writers"; Sicher, *Style and Structure in the Prose of Isaac Babel,* chap. 6; Sicher, *Jews in Russian Literature,* chap. 3; Nakhimovsky, *Russian-Jewish Literature and Identity,* chap. 3.

108. Isaac Babel, "Korol'," in Babel, *Sochineniia,* 1:123.

109. At the beginning of "Korol'," a messenger says to Benia, "Ia imeiu vam skazat' paru slov" ("I have a few words to tell you"), rather than the grammatically correct "Ia dolzhen vam skazat' paru slov." Using the verb *imet´* in this context is probably a direct borrowing from Yiddish or Ukrainian. Babel, "Korol'," 120.

110. Babel, "How Things Were Done in Odessa," 147.

111. Babel, "The Father," 164.

112. Babel, "The King," 134.

113. Babel, "How Things Were Done in Odessa," 151.

114. Ibid., 146; see, e.g., 150 for an example of Benia's Yiddish-inflected speech.

115. Ibid., 151. The Yiddish phrase is *biz hundert un tsvantsik.* According to Michael Wex, the ideal life span for a Jew is 120, because Moses allegedly lived to that age. See Wex, *Born to Kvetch,* 109.

116. Babel, "How Things Were Done in Odessa," 149.

117. Jabotinsky, *The Five,* 28.

118. Ibid., 139–140.

119. Slavin, *Interventsiia,* 92–93.

120. "Svad'ba Shneersona" continues to be extremely popular in Odessa today, though few outside the city are familiar with Miron Iampolskii. Paustovskii mentions Iampolskii and "Svad'ba Shneersona" in volume 4 of his memoirs, *Years of Hope.* Arkadii Severnyi recorded this song in the 1970s.

121. Miron Iampolskii, "Svad'ba Shneersona," in Arkanov, *Odesskii iumor,* 88.

122. Ibid., 89.

123. Ibid., 88–89.

124. Babel, "The King," 136.

125. *The Twelve Chairs* (*Dvenadtsat´ stul´ev*) was originally published in 1928; *The Golden Calf* (*Zolotoi telenok*) was originally published in 1931. For different theories as to why Ostap Bender claims to be "the son of a Turkish citizen," see Fitzpatrick, "The World of Ostap Bender," 535–557; Rubin, *Jewish Gangsters of Modern Literature,* 47; and Sabatos, "Crossing the 'Exaggerated Boundaries' of Black Sea Culture," 83–103.

126. Sheila Fitzpatrick insists that Ostap Bender-like conmen and impostors, known as *obmanshchiki* and *Moshenniki,* were rampant in the 1920s and 1930s. The escapades of such swindlers were reported regularly in newspapers, especially *Izvestiia,* in the 1930s, with journalists even expressing delight and admiration for their elaborate schemes. See Fitzpatrick, *Tear off the Masks!,* chap. 13.

127. Il'f and Petrov, *The Twelve Chairs,* 44.

128. Il'f and Petrov, *The Little Golden Calf,* 122; Il'f and Petrov, *Zolotoi telenok: roman,* 93; Il'f and Petrov, *The Twelve Chairs,* 57. Odessans today frequently mention Bender's comment about contraband with pride, and it is not uncommon for tour guides to quote it when passing by Little Arnaut (Malaia arnautskaia) Street.

129. Il'f and Petrov, *Zolotoi telenok,* 93.

130. Il'f and Petrov, *The Twelve Chairs,* 135, 45; Il'f and Petrov, *Dvenadtsat´ stul´ev,* 163, 80.

131. Il'f and Petrov, *The Twelve Chairs,* 113.

132. Ibid., 113–114.

133. Ibid., 171.

134. Il'f and Petrov, *The Little Golden Calf,* 248; Il'f and Petrov, *Zolotoi telenok,* 179.

135. Il'f and Petrov, *The Twelve Chairs,* 51; Il'f and Petrov, *Dvenadtsat´ stul´ev,* 84.

136. Il'f and Petrov, *The Twelve Chairs,* 284.

137. Ibid., 350.

138. Il'f and Petrov, *The Little Golden Calf,* 25.

139. Ibid., 23.

140. Il'f and Petrov, *The Twelve Chairs,* 52.

141. Ibid., 47.

142. Ibid., 48.

143. Siniavskii, *Soviet Civilization,* 177.

144. Babel, "The Father," 163.

145. Il'f and Petrov, *The Little Golden Calf,* 26.

146. Il'f and Petrov, *The Twelve Chairs,* 343.

147. *Odesskii kommunist,* February 22, 1920.

148. Ibid., February 29, 1920.

149. Stites, *Russian Popular Culture,* 62. See also Gorsuch, *Youth in Revolutionary Russia.*

150. Naiman, *Sex in Public,* 149.

151. During the 1920s two of the most common themes satirized in *Krokodil* were the decadence of NEP and the bankruptcy of the so-called bourgeois capitalist states of the West.

152. *Odesskii kommunist,* February 29, 1920.

153. *Shkval,* no. 50 (December 18, 1926), 12. Arkadii Severnyi recorded "Alesha Sha" in the 1970s. The lyrics can be found on the Internet website *Blatnoi fol´klor,* http://www.blat.dp.ua/bv25-3.htm. The song is replete with criminal slang and takes place in Odessa. "Sha" is slang for quiet, a direct borrowing from Yiddish.

154. *Vechernie izvestiia,* November 2, 1923; November 5, 1923.

155. Ibid., October 9, 1927.

156. *Shkval,* no. 38 (September 25, 1926), 1.

157. Ibid.

158. *Shkval,* no. 45 (November 13, 1926), 5.

159. Ibid.

160. Ibid. This song is mentioned in Kuprin's "Gambrinus."

161. *Vechernie izvestiia,* October 9, 1927.

162. The term *Gesheftmakher* is of Yiddish origin; during NEP it carried an extremely negative connotation.

163. The use of the word "pogrom" is clearly not accidental, given that the music partly derived from Jewish music and the fiddle was considered the quintessential Jewish instrument.

164. *Shkval,* no. 27 (June 30, 1928), 5–6. On the popularity of the foxtrot and the anxiety and controversy it evoked among many Bolsheviks, see Gorsuch, *Youth in Revolutionary Russia,* 120–125.

165. A. Men'shoi, "Uberite," *Zhizn´ iskusstva,* March 10, 1924, 1.

166. On the attack against decadent music, including jazz, during the Cultural Revolution, see Starr, *Red and Hot,* chap. 5. Utesov's recordings of these songs and other recordings can be found on Utesov, *Sobranie luchshikh zapisei.* The lyrics for "S odesskogo kichmana" and "Gop so smykom" can be found in Smirnov, *Poi, Odessa!* 34–35. The lyrics for Utesov's version of "Bublichki" can be found on the Internet website *NoMoreLyrics—Lyrics Database of All Music Genres and a Lot of Soundtrack Lyrics,* http://www.nomorelyrics.net/ru/song/21960.html. "Bublichki," written by the Odessit Iakov Iadov, was, according to Richard Stites "the most popular unofficial song of the twenties." See Stites, *Russian Popular Culture,* 48.

167. Utesov, *Zapiski aktera,* 124.

168. Starr, *Red and Hot,* 147–149; Dmitriev, *Leonid Utesov,* 94–100.

169. Starr, *Red and Hot,* 85–86. See also Nelson, *Music for the Revolution,* chap. 3, 4, 8. Lebedinskii, *Vosem´ let borby za proletarskuiu muzyku.*

170. N. Briusova, "Na bor'bu s muzykal'nym durmanom," *Za proletarskuiu muzyku,* no. 1 (1930); Briusova, "Dovesti do kontsa bor'bu s nepmanskoi muzykoi," *Za proletarskuiu muzyku,* no. 9 (1930).

171. *Shkval,* no. 18 (May 1925), 13.

172. Ibid.

173. *Vechernie izvestiia,* May 26, 1923.

174. Ibid.

175. "San'ka Chertopolokh was published in *Vechernie izvestiia* between October and November, 1923.

176. Ibid., November 16, 1923.

177. The Belomorkanal, or White Sea Canal project, was built by slave labor, between 1931 and 1934. According to Yuri Slezkine, "all the top leadership positions" in the construction project (which was administered by the secret police) were held by Jews. See Slezkine, *The Jewish Century,* 199.

178. The song's lyrics can be found in Dzhekobson and Dzhekobson, *Pesennyi fol´klor GULAGa kak istoricheskii istochnik (1917–1939),* 335–337.

179. Semen Kirsanov, "Dve Odessy," *Shkval,* no. 44 (October 27, 1928), 3.

180. Brat'ia Tur, "Odessa," in Gavrilov and Golubovskii, *Est´ gorod u moria,* 335.

181. Vladimir Narbut, "7 Fevralia 1920," in Taubenshlak and Iavorska, *Gde obryvaetsia Rossiia,* 406. Narbut originally published this poem in 1921.

182. Babel, "Froim Grach," 174.

183. Ibid., 175.

184. These lyrics are cited in Dmitriev, *Leonid Utesov,* 100. Utesov, however, does not sing this verse in his recorded version of "S odesskogo kichmana."

185. Il'f and Petrov, *The Little Golden Calf,* 164.

186. Ibid. "Café Florida" is most likely a stand-in for Café Fankoni.

187. Ibid., 233–234.

188. The image of the Wandering Jew as the Other who is responsible for the death of Jesus Christ has figured prominently in Christian discourse and, according to Regine Rosenthal, "represents the collective guilt of the Jewish people." Rosenthal, "Inventing the Other," 173. See also Rosenberg, *From Shylock to Svengali,* chap. 8; and Felsenstein, *Anti-Semitic Stereotypes,* chap. 4.

189. Il'f and Petrov, *The Little Golden Calf,* 402.

190. Il'f died of tuberculosis in Moscow in 1937. Petrov was killed in Sevastopol' in 1942 while working as a war correspondent.

191. It is impossible to determine when particular anecdotes and songs were written or to gauge their popularity. Certainly by the 1960s and 1970s they were widely shared, once tape recorders became available in the Soviet Union and people exchanged the bootlegged recordings of Vladimir Vysotskii and Arkadii Severnyi, who both recorded Odessan songs. These recordings were never officially released in the Soviet Union, as the dissemination of criminal folksongs was illegal. But many of these songs were already in circulation by the Stalin era. See Dzhekobson and Dzhekobson, *Pesennyi fol'klor GULAGa kak istoricheskii istochnik (1917–1939).*

192. See, for instance, Stites, *Russian Popular Culture;* Fitzpatrick, *The Cultural Front;* Timasheff, *The Great Retreat;* Brandenberger, *National Bolshevism.*

193. Stites, *Russian Popular Culture,* 96.

194. Veidlinger, *The Moscow State Yiddish Theater,* 160–161.

195. "Ten Daughters" ("Desiat' dochirei") appears on Utesov's collection *Para gnedikh,* recorded between 1937 and 1940. "Uncle Elia" ("Diadia Elia") appears on *Zhdi menia,* recorded between 1939 and 1942. Both are available on Utesov, *Sobranie luchshikh zapisei,* disc 1. The lyrics for both can be found in Khmel'nitskii, *Vse khorosho prekrasnaia markiza,* 107–110 and 94–97, respectively. For a description of Utesov's performance of "Diadia Elia," see Revels, *Riadom s Utesovym,* 256–257.

196. Kozachinskii, *Zelenyi furgon,* 132–133.

197. Babel, "The King," 135.

198. Slavin, "Dva boitsa," 5, 7.

199. Ibid., 10.

200. Ibid., 7.

201. Ibid., 11.

202. Ibid., 5.

203. The well-known song "Shalandy, polnye kefali" is featured in the film *Dva boitsa,* directed by Leonid Lukin (1943).

204. "U Chernogo moria" ("On the Black Sea") appears on Utesov's collection *U Chernogo moria,* recorded between 1949 and 1953. It can be found on Utesov, *Sobranie luchshikh zapisei,* disc 2. The lyrics can be found in Khmel'nitskii, *Vse khorosho prekrasnaia markiza,* 57–60.

205. On the anti-cosmopolitan campaign and the measures taken against Soviet Jewry, see Kostyrchenko, *Out of the Red Shadows;* Kostyrchenko, *Tainaia politika Stalina;* Slezkine, *The Jewish Century,* 275–329; Brandenberger, "Stalin's Last Crime?" 187–204; and Brent and Naumov, *Stalin's Last Crime.*

206. Fitzpatrick, *Tear off the Masks,* chap. 14.

207. Ibid.

208. Pil'skii, "Liki gorodov," 331.

209. Ibid., 330–331.

4. Revival and Survival

1. See Field, *Private Life and Communist Morality.*

2. On Romania's occupation of Odessa during World War II, see Dallin, *Odessa;* and Ancel, *Transnistria,* chap. 4.

3. Dallin, *Odessa,* 62. The evacuation of Odessa's population during the fall of 1941 was more successful than similar operations elsewhere on the Soviet front, largely because it took the Romanian army three months (August to October) to capture the city. Manley, *To the Tashkent Station,* 57–58.

4. Dallin, *Odessa,* 62.

5. Altshuler, *Soviet Jewry on the Eve of the Holocaust,* 225.

6. Kotler, *Ocherki,* 35.

7. Ibid. The Romanian occupiers massacred thousands of Jews almost immediately. Most of the remaining Jews ended up in the ghettos and concentration camps of the Transnistria region. Located between the Dniester and Southern Bug rivers, Transnistria was awarded to Romania by Hitler. Romania intended to use Transnistria as its dumping ground and killing fields for undesirables. Odessa served as the region's capital. See Ancel, *Transnistria,* chap. 4; Radu, *The Holocaust in Romania,* chaps. 5–6; and Arad, *The Holocaust in the Soviet Union,* 240–245.

8. On the Soviet "hero cities" of the Great Patriotic War, see *Goroda—geroi velikoi otechestvennoi voiny.*

9. Documentary accounts, memoirs, and fiction about Odessa's heroic struggle against occupation—which included the partisans who used Odessa's legendary catacombs to organize and launch counterattacks—were published in large numbers after the war. See, for instance, Evstigneev, *70 geroicheskikh dnei;* Azarov, *Osazhdennaia Odessa;* Krylov, *Ne pomerknet nikogda;* Korol'kov, *V katakombakh Odessy;* Dolzhenkova, *Odesskie katakomby;* and Valentin Kataev, "Katakomby," in Kataev, *Povesti i rasskazy.*

10. Altshuler, *Soviet Jewry since the Second World War,* 87.

11. Ibid.

12. In 1959 there were 2,267,814 Jews in the Soviet Union. Ibid., 75.

13. Zev Katz, "The Jews in the Soviet Union," in Katz, *Handbook of Major Soviet Nationalities,* 357.

14. Levin, *The Jews of the Soviet Union,* 2:726. On the emigration of Soviet Jewry, see Salitan, *Politics and Nationality;* and Morozov, *Documents on Soviet Jewish Emigration.* In 1970 there were 1,810,876 Jews living in the USSR, constituting 0.7 percent of the total Soviet population. Between the early 1970s and 1985, approximately 12 percent of Soviet Jewry emigrated, with nearly 60 percent of them going to Israel. See Altshuler, *Soviet Jewry since the Second World War,* 21, 231.

15. The first new edition of Babel's stories was published in 1957. See Babel, *Izbrannoe.* On the republication of the Ostap Bender novels, see Fitzpatrick, *Tear off the Masks,* 299–300.

16. Lev Sheinin, "Dinars with Holes," in Sheinin, *Diary of a Criminologist;* Lev Sheinin, "Dinary s dyrkami," in Sheinin, *Zapiski sledovatelia.*

17. Sheinin insists that he always wanted to be a writer, but in 1923 he was persuaded to become a criminal investigator. He worked as the chief of the Investigating Department of the Procurator's Office of the USSR until 1950, when he decided to devote his time entirely to writing. It is worth noting that Evgenii Petrov had also worked as a criminal investigator—first in Odessa and then in Moscow—before becoming a writer. Many of Petrov's friends

insisted that he drew from his experiences in law enforcement in creating his stories, much as Lev Sheinin would do later. Whether an Odessan thief named "Admiral Nelson" actually existed is unclear. Sheinin unquestionably embellished his stories for comical effect.

18. Excerpts from *Vremia bol'shikh ozhidanii* were first published in the journal *Oktiabr',* no. 3 (March 1959): 3–37. Paustovskii had previously submitted it to *Novyi mir* in 1958, but it had been rejected, with the journal's editors Aleksandr Tvardovskii and Aleksandr Dement'ev berating him for (among other things) his virtual deification of Babel and his "aesthetically exotic" view of Odessa. See Kozlov, "The Readers of Novyi mir, 194–196.

19. Paustovskii, *Years of Hope,* 10, 123–129, 118, 89–91.

20. Ibid., 90.

21. See Utesov, *Zapiski aktera.*

22. Utesov's three memoirs are *S pesnei po zhizni;* "Moia Odessa," 123–138; and *Spasibo serdtse.* "Moia Odessa" is a short essay, much of which Utesov subsequently included in *Spasibo serdtse.* As will become clear in this chapter, Utesov did more than practically anybody else to create and disseminate the Odessa myth, given his immense popularity, and given that he was one of the few individuals who played an important role in both the interwar era and the post-Stalin era.

23. Not all the accounts that were published during this era professed to be memoirs; some were billed as historical novels. Yet both these genres share much in terms of narrative techniques, in the events they describe and in the dialogue imputed to their characters. The most common topic was the life and fate of Mishka Iaponchik, the alleged prototype for Isaac Babel's Benia Krik. See, for instance, Fomin, *Zapiski starogo chekista;* Lukin and Polianovskii, *Sotrudnik ChK;* Chetverikov, *Kotovskii;* Anan'ev, *Kotovskii;* and Kravets, *Kto takoi Mishka Iaponchik.* The production and publication of memoirs and historical fiction about old Odessa increased exponentially after 1986, once censorship had been eliminated.

24. On the impact of technology on Soviet culture, see Roth-Ey, "Mass Media and the Remaking of Soviet Culture."

25. The following films, all released in the post-Stalin era, were, to varying degrees, important contributions to the Odessa myth: *Eskadra ukhodit na zapad,* directed by Miron Bilinskii (1965); *Neulovimye mstiteli,* directed by Edmond Keosaian (1966); *Svad'ba v Malinovke,* directed by Andrei Tutyshkin (1967); *Tikhaia Odessa,* directed by Valerii Isakov (1967); *Novye prikliucheniia neulovimykh,* directed by Edmond Keosaian (1968); *Brilliantovaia ruka,* directed by Leonid Gaidai (1968); *Interventsiia,* directed by Gennadii Poloka (1968); *Zolotoi telenok,* directed by Mikhail Shveitser (1968); *Opasnyi gastroli,* directed by Georgii Iungval'd-Khil'kevich (1969); *Dvenadtsat' stul'ev,* directed by Leonid Gaidai (1971); *Dvenadtsat' stul'ev,* directed by Mark Zakharov (1977); and *My iz dzhaza,* directed by Karen Shakhnazarov (1983). Although Gaidai's *Brilliantovaia ruka* does not necessarily take place in Odessa, it is situated in one of the Soviet Union's southern seaports and the principal swindler in the film is played by Andrei Mironov, who went on to play Ostap Bender in Mark Zakharov's 1977 production of *Dvenadtsat' stul'ev.* Gennadii Poloka's *Interventsiia* was not released until 1987.

26. Smith, *Songs to Seven Strings,* 95.

27. On the history of *magnitizdat* in the Soviet Union, see Smith, *Songs to Seven Strings,* chap. 4.

28. Ibid., 101. The criminal folksong was just one genre of music that circulated on *magnitizdat.* Equally popular were gypsy songs and so-called cruel romance (*zhestokii romans*) songs, melodramatic ballads about infidelity and revenge. All three genres fall into

the category of what Gerald Stanton Smith calls "the underground song," theoretically banned but immensely popular.

29. Dzhekobson and Dzhekobson, *Pesennyi fol'klor GULAGa kak istoricheskii istochnik (1940–1991),* 15. See also Terts (Siniavskii), "Otechestvo, blatnaia pesnia," 72–118.

30. There are dozens of biographies about Vysotskii, and his music is now readily available on compact discs, on the Internet, and in the many collected volumes of his lyrics and his poetry. For a biography and assorted recollections by his acquaintances (which are often combined with selections of his writings), see Krymova, *Ia, konechno vernus';* Berestov et al., *Mir Vysotskogo;* Perevozchikov, *Neizvestnyi Vysotskii;* Novikov, *Vysotskii;* Razzakov, *Vladimir Vysotskii;* Kanchukov, *Priblizhenie k Vysotskomu;* and Maizel's, *Nash Vysotskii.* For Vysotskii's writings, including his song lyrics, poems, and essays, see Vysotskii, *Sobranie stikhov i pesen;* and Vysotskii, *Sochineniia.* The most comprehensive source for Vysotskii's music, however, is the Internet, with many websites containing lyrics to his songs as well as downloadable music files, including his recordings of the classic criminal folksongs from earlier times. By far the most complete website is http://www.kulichki.com/vv/. English translations of selections from his writings and reminiscences about his life can be found in Andreev and Boguslavskii, *Vladimir Vysotskii;* and Vysotskii, *Songs and Poems.* See also Smith, *Songs to Seven Strings,* chap. 6.

31. Vysotskii's rendition of "Moscow-Odessa" can be heard at http://www.kulichki.com/vv/pesni/v-kotoryj-raz-lechu.html; his recording of "Grom progremel," originally made popular in Lev Slavin's *Interventsiia,* can be heard at http://www.kulichki.com/vv/pesni/grom-progremel-zolyaciya-idet.html; and, in the tradition of the Jewish gangster wedding that erupts into chaos and violence, Vysotskii sings "Zdravstvuite! Moe pochten'e," which is replete with Yiddish words. See http://www.kulichki.com/vv/pesni/other/zdravstvujte-moe-pochtene-i.html. All these websites contain the lyrics to these songs as well.

32. Vysotskii died in 1980 at the age of forty-two. His death was hardly noted in the official press. See Stites, *Russian Popular Culture,* 158.

33. There are few surveys of Soviet underground music, aside from the biographies of Vysotskii and Gerald Stanton Smith's *Songs to Seven Strings.* Michael and Lidia Jacobson's two collections of criminal folksongs include thoroughly researched commentary on the history of various songs and the performers who played them. See Dzhekobson and Dzhekobson, *Pesennyi fol'klor GULAGa kak istoricheskii istochnik (1917–1939)* and *Pesennyi fol'klor GULAGa kak istoricheskii istochnik (1940–1991).* The best source of information, however, is the Internet. Perhaps the most comprehensive website is http://www.blatata.com, which includes biographies, discographies, photographs, and song lyrics, featuring more than five hundred musicians and groups. The better-known musicians who sang criminal folksongs during the post-Stalin era include Aleksandr Galich, Arkadii Severnyi, the group Brat'ia Zhemchuzhnye, Villi Tokarev, Iulii Kim, Aleksandr Rozenbaum, and Mikhail Shufutinskii. Not everyone sang about old Odessa, but the Jewish city of sin has a special place in the genre, since no other Soviet city reflected the intersection of criminality and music as old Odessa did. See Dzhekobson and Dzhekobson, *Pesennyi fol'klor GULAGa kak istoricheskii istochnik (1940–1991),* 15 n. 1.

34. For a biography of Arkadii Severnyi, see Sheleg, *Spoem, zhigan;* and Sheleg, *Arkadii Severnyi.* Both volumes contain lyrics from a selection of the songs he performed. His recordings are now available on compact disc in a collection containing fifteen of his concerts: Severnyi, *MP3: zvezdnaia seriia.* But as with Soviet underground music in general, the Internet is the best source for his recordings: see http://www.severnij.dp.ua/; and

http://www.angelfire.com/sc/serge23/images/severn.htm. Severnyi's real name was Arkadii Dmitrievich Zvezdin.

35. Severnyi recorded his first *Odesskii kontsert* at his friend Sergei Maklakov's apartment in Leningrad on November 14, 1974. See Sheleg, *Arkadii Severnyi,* 55.

36. Cited in ibid., 43.

37. On the history of anecdotes in Russian and Soviet culture, see Graham, "A Cultural Analysis of the Russo-Soviet *Anekdot*"; and Dreitser, *Taking Penguins to the Movies.*

38. Graham, "A Cultural Analysis of the Russo-Soviet *Anekdot,*" 3. For examples of anecdotes created before Stalin's death, see Andreevich, *Kreml´ i narod.* Because of censorship, the publication of Soviet anecdotes before the late 1980s always took place abroad. See, for instance, Dreitser, *Forbidden Laughter;* Dolgopolova, *Russia Dies Laughing;* Telesin, *1001 izbrannyi politicheskii anekdot;* Harris and Rabinovich, *The Jokes of Oppression;* and Shturman and Tiktin, *Sovetskii Soiuz v zerkale politicheskogo anekdota.* With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the publishing of anecdotes within the former Soviet Republics became commonplace. See, for instance, *Sovetskii politicheskii anekdot.* As I have been arguing throughout this book, there is a strong connection between Soviet humor and Jewish humor, and many collections are either explicitly or exclusively devoted to jokes about Jews and their place in Soviet society. See, for instance, Khait and Levenbuk, *1001 evreiskii anekdot na kazhdyi den´;* and Stolovich, *Evrei shutiat.* Moreover, Jewish and Soviet humor often intersected in Odessa, renowned as it was for both. In Stolovich's *Evrei shutiat,* Odessa is the only city that has its own chapter. See also Kotov, *Anekdoty ot odessitov,* which, despite its title (or, perhaps more accurately, because of its title) is largely a collection of Jewish jokes.

39. Siniavskii, *Soviet Civilization,* 224.

40. The theater had actually been founded in L'vov in 1947, but in 1953 an exchange was made: the theater moved to Odessa, and Odessa's drama theater moved to L'vov. At first, plays were performed in Ukrainian, but they gradually switched over to Russian, perhaps as a result of Russian being Odessa's lingua franca. On the history of Odessa's musical comedy theater, see Friedberg, *How Things Were Done in Odessa,* 100–102; Golota, *Teatral´naia Odessa,* 219–223; and Maksimenko, *Imia, Mikhail Vodianoi.*

41. Maksimenko, *Imia, Mikhail Vodianoi,* 3.

42. Plotkin originally wrote *Na rassvete* in Ukrainian (titled *Na svitanku*). It was subsequently translated into Russian. The Ukrainian text can be found in Plotkin, *Vybrani tvory v dvokh tomakh.* The Russian translation can be found in Plotkin, *Vstrechnye ogni.*

43. Cited in Maksimenko, *Imia, Mikhail Vodianoi,* 138. In his study on theater in Odessa, Vladimir Golota maintains that Iaponchik's brother showed up unexpectedly at the theater one day, going backstage to remind the cast and crew that "Mishka Iaponchik was a robber [*naletchik*], and he must be depicted this way on stage." Ostensibly a direct quotation, this suggests that having a criminal pedigree in Odessa was valued in certain circles during the post-Stalin era. Cited in Golota, *Teatral´naia Odessa,* 223.

44. On KVN, see Friedberg, *How Things Were Done in Odessa,* 47–48; Vishevsky, *Soviet Literary Culture in the 1970s; Smeites´ dzhentl´meny;* Evans, "From *Truth* to *Time,*" chap. 5. Odessa's team won the all-Union title in 1967, thereby reinforcing the belief that Odessans were the funniest people in the Soviet Union. The show was canceled in 1972, but it was re-created in 1986, once Glasnost got under way. Odessans revered their city's success in the tournaments, with newspaper articles regularly boasting of their talent and the way Odessa's team captured the imagination and attention of the whole city. See, for instance, *Znamia kommunizma,* January 1, 1966; April 11, 1967; May 28, 1967.

45. For an overview of the early careers of Kartsev, Il'chenko, and Zhvanetskii, see Friedberg, *How Things Were Done in Odessa,* 84; Nakhimovsky, "Mikhail Zhvanetskii"; and Kartsev, *Maloi, Sukhoi i Pisatel'.*

46. Kartsev, *Maloi, Sukhoi i Pisatel',* 21.

47. Video recordings of Zhvanetskii's performances can be found on *Ves' Zhvanetskii: sobranie sochinenii,* directed by Aleksandr Faifman (1999), which has been issued on both VHS and DVD. The video includes one of his most memorable pieces about Odessa, "Kak shutiat v Odesse" ("How They Joke in Odessa."), which is discussed later in this chapter. Audio recordings of Kartsev, Il'chenko, and others can be heard on the MP3 CD collection *Iumorina.*

48. Zhvanetskii's collected works consist of four volumes, each containing his material for the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, respectively. Zhvanetskii, *Sobranie proizvedenii v chetyrekh tomakh.* The Worldwide Club of Odessans was founded in 1990. It is a transnational network that seeks to unify the Odessans who left for Moscow, the Americas, and Israel with those who remained behind. For more information, see their website: http://www.odessitclub.org.

49. The monument was erected in 1998. A picture of it can be found on Ruckman and Gubar's CD-ROM collection *Odessa.* It can also be seen on the Web at http://odessa.ru.russian-women.net/odessa_n26506.shtml.

50. *Znamia kommunizma* was originally called *Bol'shevitskoe znamia,* from its foundation in 1938 until it was renamed in the mid-1950s. For a biography of Karp Polubakov, see Kamennyi, *Odessa,* 124.

51. *Znamia kommunizma,* February 2, 1964.

52. For a biography of Semen Livshin, see Kamennyi, *Odessa,* 125.

53. The column caustically maintained that there are two key moments in the life of someone who changes his domicile: "(a) when he moves into his new apartment (b) when he writes his first complaint about it." *Vecherniaia Odessa,* January 29, 1977.

54. Ibid., June 30, 1977.

55. The Day of Humor remained a largely unorganized series of events until 1973, when Odessa's leading humorists started showing greater initiative in planning and coordinating the day's festivities.

56. On the organization of *Iumorina,* see Friedberg, *How Things Were Done in Odessa,* 48.

57. *Znamia kommunizma,* April 1, 1967.

58. Ibid.

59. Ibid., April 3, 1973.

60. *Vecherniaia Odessa,* March 30, 1974.

61. *Vecherniaia Odessa* announced the contest on January 1, 1974. The newspaper published the winners on March 30, 1974.

62. Ibid., March 28, 1974; April 1, 1974; April 4, 1974.

63. Vishevsky, *Soviet Literary Culture in the 1970s,* 67. Odessa's public celebration of the Day of Humor resumed in 1987. It has since become an iconic event in Odessa.

64. On the time Vysotskii spent in Odessa, see Tsybul'skii, *Zhizn' i puteshestviia V. Vysotskogo,* 244–256.

65. Severnyi put on several concerts in Odessa in 1977, backed by the group Chernomorskaia chaika on at least two occasions. They are available on Severnyi, *MP3: zvezdnaia seriia.*

66. *Znamia kommunizma,* July 30, 1967.

67. Maksimenko, *Imia, Mikhail Vodianoi,* 165–166.

68. Catherine Nepomnyashchy maintains that "Abram Terts" represents the "threatening other—thief and Jew," identifying himself with what was considered dangerous and alien to Soviet society. See Nepomnyashchy, *Abram Tertz and the Poetics of Crime,* 37. Abrashka Terts is a pickpocket (*karmanshchik*) in one of the variations of the criminal folksong "Na Moldavanke muzyka igraet" ("Music Plays in the Moldavanka"). See Dzhekobson and Dzhekobson, *Pesennyi fol'klor GULAGa kak istoricheskii istochnik (1940–1991),* 173–174. There is no evidence, however, to suggest that an actual Jewish gangster named Abram Terts ever lived.

69. On Yiddish culture during the post-Stalin era, see Pinkus, *The Soviet Government and the Jews, 1948–1967,* 259–285; Chone Shmeruk, "Twenty-Five Years of Sovetish Heymland: Impressions and Criticism," in Ro'i and Becker, *Jewish Culture and Identity in the Soviet Union.*

70. Altshuler, *Soviet Jewry since the Second World War,* 181.

71. Since the mid-1930s the Jews did, in fact, have a politically defined national territory in the USSR, called Birobidzhan, located in the Soviet Far East near the Chinese border. The government's campaign to induce Soviet Jewry to settle there was largely a failure. In 1959 there were merely 14,269 Jews living in Birobidzhan, making up 8.76 percent of the territory's total population. See Altshuler, *Soviet Jewry since the Second World War,* 76. On the history of Birobidzhan, see Kagedan, *Soviet Zion;* and Weinberg, *Stalin's Forgotten Zion.*

72. On Jewish life in the USSR during the postwar era in general, see Slezkine, *The Jewish Century,* chap. 4; Levin, *The Jews in the Soviet Union since 1917,* Vol. 2; Pinkus, *The Jews of the Soviet Union,* chap. 4.

73. Nina Tumarkin contends that "in Khrushchev's cosmology, to admit the reality of the Holocaust—the Nazi genocide of the Jewish people—meant to deprive the larger Soviet polity of its status as supervictim, par excellence, which was touted as a major source of legitimacy." Tumarkin, *The Living and the Dead,* 121.

74. Slezkine, *The Jewish Century,* 338.

75. Friedberg, *The Jew in Post-Stalin Soviet Literature,* 46.

76. The Soviet government's policies toward the Jews did not remain static over the course of the three decades between Khrushchev's "Secret Speech" and the beginnings of Glasnost. A multitude of factors influenced the course of events, including the Cold War, elevated Jewish national consciousness (which swelled and waned at particular moments), the Arab-Israeli conflict, the rise of the Jewish émigré movement, the mobilization of international Jewry in support of prospective émigrés, and domestic political concerns not directly related to the Jews. Soviet Jews in contact with relatives abroad remained perpetually under suspicion, and the government labeled anyone who wished to emigrate as a traitor. The 1967 Arab-Israeli War significantly increased the Soviet government's anti-Zionist posture, branding Israel as a state with imperialistic ambitions. But despite the impact of such factors on Jewish life in the USSR, the central thrust of Soviet policy as it pertained to Jewish culture remained the same, and, accordingly, these three decades may be treated as one continuous period.

77. Stolovich, *Evrei shutiat,* 41–42. "Rabinovich" was the name usually used to denote a Jew in Soviet anecdotes, much as "Ivan Ivanovich" was a generic name used to designate an ethnic Russian.

78. Cited in Dreitser, *Taking Penguins to the Movies,* 130. Alice Nakhimovsky maintains that the indelibility of one's Jewishness was a cardinal element in Soviet Jewish humor. See Nakhimovsky, "Mikhail Zhvanetskii." In this sense, Odessa was indelibly a Jewish city.

79. See, for instance, *Odessa: ocherk istorii goroda-geroia;* and Zagoruiko, *Po stranitsam istorii Odessy i odesshchiny.* Most history books produced during this era focused on the heroic moments in the city's history—the Revolution and World War II.

80. Zagoruiko, *Po stranitsam istorii Odessy i odesshchiny,* 2:4, 35. Although it is true that the Jews and the Greeks made up a significant portion of Odessa's bourgeoisie, dominating the international grain trade, there was a substantial Jewish proletariat as well. See Weinberg, *The Revolution,* chap. 2.

81. Zagoruiko, *Po stranitsam istorii Odessy i odesshchiny,* 2:43–44; *Odessa: ocherk istorii goroda-geroia,* 183.

82. Zagoruiko, *Po stranitsam istorii Odessy i odesshchiny,* 2:54.

83. Kotov, *Anekdoty ot odessitov,* 230. Ironically this joke imputes a greater share of the population to the Jews than they ever actually had, as it implies that 75 percent of the population is Jewish.

84. Arkanov, *Odesskii iumor,* 444.

85. Kotov, *Anekdoty ot odessitov,* 144.

86. Zhvanetskii, "Goroda," in *Sobranie proizvedenii,* 1:131–132. "May we all be healthy [*Chtob my byli vse zdorovy*]" is structurally a Yiddish expression. Yiddish speakers regularly intersperse their speech with phrases that begin with "may you," and they can either be blessings or curses.

87. Ibid., 1:226–227.

88. Ibid., 1:224.

89. Buba Kastorskii, played by Boris Sichkin, appears in the films *The Elusive Avengers* (*Neulovimye mstiteli*) and *The New Adventures of the Elusives* (*Novye prikliucheniia neulovimykh*). The movies were based in part on a story from the 1920s called *Krasnye d'iavol'iata,* written by Pavel Bliakhin. Notably Kastorskii is not a character in the original story. See Bliakhin, *Krasnye d'iavol'iata.*

90. *Novye prikliucheniia neulovimykh.*

91. Sheinin, "Dinars with Holes," 71–72.

92. Ibid., 69.

93. Utesov, *S pesnei po zhizni,* 84.

94. On cursing in Yiddish, see chapter 1, note 152, this volume.

95. Mikhail Zhvanetskii's sketches are filled with phrases beginning with "may you," thus alerting the reader that the speaker is either Jewish or an Odessan who has absorbed the prevalent speech patterns of the city's Jews.

96. As cited in Dreitser, *Forbidden Laughter,* 74–75, with some modifications.

97. Paustovskii, *Vremia bol'shikh ozhidanii,* 136. My translation, with some modifications, is based on Paustovskii, *Years of Hope,* 127.

98. On diabetes as a "Jewish illness," see Efron, *Medicine and the German Jews,* chap. 4.

99. This joke, which dates at least from the early twentieth century, has circulated in many variations. A version from 1916 can be found in Moshkovskii, *Evreiskie anekdoty,* 13, located in GAOO, f. 13, op. 1, d. 410, ll. 12–29.

100. Plotkin, *Vstrechnye ogni,* 12–13.

101. Mikhail Zhvanetskii, "Svad'ba na sto sem'desiat chelovek," in Zhvanetskii, *Sobranie proizvedenii,* 2:172–189.

102. *Novye prikliucheniia neulovimykh.*

103. The distinction between the interwar and post-Stalin Odessit in this regard is not entirely black and white. Ostap Bender, despite his vigor, regularly complains about his health, as do many of Babel's characters. But in images of the Odessit of the 1960s and 1970s

there is certainly more of an emphasis on health-related problems, and this often serves as an effective marker of Jewishness.

104. The Jewish big nose stereotype is, of course, widely known. Red hair is a less well-known stereotype, but it has been around for a long time, tracing back to medieval representations of Judas. See Felsenstein, *Anti-Semitic Stereotypes,* 31; and Rosenberg, *From Shylock to Svengali,* 22.

105. The Yiddish word for "afflictions" is normally pronounced *TSO-res.* It is of Hebraic origins and, in modern Hebrew, is pronounced *tsa-ROT.* The expression is commonly used in the English spoken by North Americans of Jewish descent. "Likhtenshtullershpillershtil'" is a name that is as improbable as "Tsires." It literally means, in Yiddish (and, for that matter, German), "Light-chair-player-quiet," but its Yiddish flavor is rooted in Zhvanetskii's alliterative use of "sh."

106. Even if there may be a rational basis for Ostap Bender's claim to be the son of a Turkish citizen, it is highly unlikely that his lineage stems from the Janissaries, the Ottoman Sultan's elite corps of troops and bodyguards.

107. Working as a cart driver was a common Jewish profession in Eastern Europe. In Odessan lore it was the profession of Mendl Krik, Benia Krik's violent and regularly inebriated father.

108. Although the narrator mentions that he does not know where he was born, he insists that his escapades are well known in Odessa. Lyrics to this song can be found in Dzhekobson and Dzhekobson, *Pesennyi fol'klor GULAGa kak istoricheskii istochnik (1940–1991),* 451–452.

109. *Svad'ba v Malinovke.*

110. Utesov, *Spasibo serdtse,* 13.

111. Sholem Aleichem, *Menakhem-Mendl: 60 briv,* 46.

112. Utesov, *Spasibo serdtse,* 68–69.

113. Utesov recounts this story with only slight variation in two of his memoirs: *S pesnei po zhizni,* 76; and *Spasibo serdtse,* 110–111.

114. My summary is based on Eisenstein, *Heritage of Music,* 254–256; Rogovoy, *The Essential Klezmer,* 28–29. *Klezmorim* is the Hebrew and Yiddish plural for "klezmer musicians," and it is often used in English as well. Note that the Gentile amateur musician suspected the Hebrew orthography to be connected with "witchcraft," a common theme in medieval and early modern anti-Semitic discourse.

115. There are many versions of this story. One can be found in Simon, *The Wise Men of Helm.*

116. Utesov, *Spasibo serdtse,* 173. In using this story, Utesov is implying that Babel never left Odessa spiritually. Notably Utesov had already included a variation of this story in his earlier memoirs, *S pesnei po zhizni,* except in that instance he uses it as an analogy for his own life. Old Odessa was an intrinsic part of Utesov's identity, and, as he seeks to demonstrate with his memoirs, an indelible part. See Utesov, *S pesnei po zhizni,* 150.

117. *Sha* is colloquial Yiddish for "quiet" and it is also considered to be Russian thieves' cant, usually included in Russian criminal slang dictionaries.

118. Chernenko, *Krasnaia zvezda, zheltaia zvezda,* 222.

119. I borrow the term "master plot" from Katerina Clark, who uses it to describe the governing narratives of socialist realism in Soviet literature. See Clark, *The Soviet Novel.*

120. The most notable exceptions are the three Ostap Bender films that are based on Il'f and Petrov's novels. They take place in the late 1920s, just as NEP is giving way to Stalin's so-called Great Transformation.

121. Argo, *Svoimi glazami,* 20.

122. As we have seen in previous chapters, this depiction of the revolutionary era had an empirical basis, with crime and bawdy entertainment exploding when the tsarist state collapsed.

123. Paustovskii, *The Story of a Life,* 204–205.

124. Plotkin, *Vstrechnye ogni,* 17.

125. Fomin, *Zapiski starogo chekista,* 65–66.

126. Mikhail Zhvanetskii, "Privetstvie teatru," in Zhvanetskii, *Sobranie proizvedenii,* 2:237.

127. Chetverikov, *Kotovskii,* 230.

128. Utesov, *S pesnei po zhizni,* 83.

129. Paustovskii, *Nachalo nevedomogo veka,* 202. My translation, with some modifications, is based on Paustovskii, *In That Dawn,* 205. Vera Kholodnaia was a young Russian film star who had also sought refuge in Odessa during the civil war. She died from influenza, but all sorts of rumors and conspiracy theories spread about her final days, including a reputed affair with Mishka Iaponchik. On Vera Kholodnaia's life, see Ziukov, *Vera Kholodnaia;* and Prokof'eva, *Koroleva ekrana.* Nikita Mikhalkov directed a movie about Vera Kholodnaia's last days titled *Raba liubvi* (*Slave of Love*) (1976).

130. Utesov, *S pesnei po zhizni,* 83.

131. Dzhekobson and Dzhekobson, *Pesennyi fol'klor GULAGa kak istoricheskii istochnik (1940–1991),* 386–387.

132. Utesov, *Spasibo serdtse,* 132.

133. Lukin and Polianovskii, *Sotrudnik ChK,* 327.

134. Ibid.

135. Utesov, *Spasibo serdtse,* 133.

136. Lukin and Polianovskii, *Sotrudnik ChK,* 329–330.

137. Fomin, *Zapiski starogo chekista,* 66. Curiously Fomin mentions that Iaponchik's "army" was largely made up of ethnic Georgians, when in fact it was made up of Jews. This is probably another instance of the postwar tendency among Soviet writers to avoid mentioning Jews whenever possible.

138. Lukin and Polianovskii, *Sotrudnik ChK,* 327.

139. Ibid., 328.

140. Utesov, *Spasibo serdtse,* 131.

141. Fomin, *Zapiski starogo chekista,* 68–70.

142. Ibid., 70. For a variation on Fomin's encounter with Iaponchik, see Lukin and Polianovskii, *Sotrudnik ChK,* 333.

143. Utesov, *Spasibo serdtse,* 130.

144. Sheinin, "Dinary s dyrkami," 152. My translation, with some modifications, is based on Sheinin, "Dinars with Holes," 67–68.

145. Sheinin, "Dinars with Holes," 64.

146. Fomin, *Zapiski starogo chekista,* 71–72.

147. Plotkin, *Vstrechnye ogni,* 45–46.

148. Lukin and Polianovskii, *Sotrudnik ChK,* 335–336. Their reference to "Moldavankan criminal folksongs" is an example of implicit Jewishness, since the Moldavanka was the predominantly Jewish (and notoriously criminal) neighborhood in old Odessa.

149. Utesov, *S pesnei po zhizni,* 67.

150. Zhvanetskii, "Privetstvie teatru," 237. Iakov Iadov authored the song "Bublichki." Iza Kremer was a popular singer who lived and performed in Odessa during the Revolution and the civil war era. On Kremer, see Savchenko, *Estrada retro.*

151. Maksimenko, *Imia, Mikhail Vodianoi,* 276–277.
152. Lukin and Polianovskii, *Sotrudnik ChK,* 327, 335–336.
153. Utesov, *Spasibo serdtse,* 134.
154. Ibid., 174.
155. Ibid., 132.
156. Ibid.
157. See chapter 2, this volume.
158. Utesov, *Spasibo serdtse,* 132.
159. Chetverikov, *Kotovskii,* 364.
160. Ibid., 366.
161. Ibid., 363.
162. Ibid.
163. *Znamia kommunizma,* January 20, 1957.
164. Fomin, *Zapiski starogo chekista,* 73.
165. Utesov, *S pesnei po zhizni,* 134.
166. Lukin and Polianovskii, *Sotrudnik ChK,* 342.
167. *Zolotoi telenok,* directed by Mikhail Shveitser.
168. Sheinin, "Dinars with Holes," 74.
169. Ibid., 79
170. Ibid., 80.
171. Gaivoron, *Odessa Says: Welcome,* 18, 5.
172. Dolzhenkova and Diachenko, *Odessa: putevoditel',* 96.
173. Gaivoron, *From Odessa to Batumi,* 18.
174. Gaivoron, *Odessa Says: Welcome,* 44.
175. Ibid., 46.
176. Gaivoron, *Odessa moi gorod rodnoi,* 61–62.
177. Ibid., 69.
178. *Vecherniaia Odessa,* September 29, 1973.
179. Mikhail Zhvanetskii, "Kak shutiat v Odesse," in Zhvanetskii, *Sobranie proizvedenii,* 2:169–172.
180. Ibid., 2:170.
181. *Vecherniaia Odessa,* January 13, 1975.
182. *Znamia kommunizma,* February 19, 1967.
183. Paustovskii, *Vremia bol'shikh ozhidanii,* 109.
184. Utesov, *Spasibo serdtse,* 113.

5. Rewriting Old Odessa's Mythical Past

1. This dialogue is from an interview with Vladimir Alenikov by Aleksandr Rapoport. See Rapoport, "Chetyre ipostasi Vladimira Alenikova." Much of this dialogue can also be found in Chernenko, *Krasnaia zvezda, zheltaia zvezda,* 284–285. Although this story is a firsthand account from Alenikov himself, he may have embellished it for comical effect. Either way, it is clearly intended to capture the cautiousness that characterized the early days of Glasnost.

2. On the evolution of Glasnost until 1989, see Nove, *Glasnost' in Action;* Gibbs, *Gorbachev's Glasnost';* McNair, *Glasnost', Perestroika, and the Soviet Media;* and Tarasulo, *Gorbachev and Glasnost'.*

3. *Vecherniaia Odessa,* March 31, 1986; April 5, 1986.

4. Ibid., March 2, 1987.

5. Ibid., April 1, 1988.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid., February 3, 1989.
10. Ibid., March 27, 1990.
11. *Akh Odessa!,* no. 1 (January 1, 1991), 1.
12. The three films based on Isaac Babel's stories are *Bindiuzhnik i korol',* directed by Vladimir Alenikov (1989); *Iskusstvo zhit' v Odesse,* directed by Georgii Iungval'd-Khil'kevich (1989); and *Zakat,* directed by Aleksandr Zel'dovich (1990).
13. Kuprin's Sashka appears in the film *Gambrinus,* directed by Dmitrii Meskhiev (1990). Kuprin's novel *Iama* (*The Pit*), which features a Jewish pimp from Odessa, has also been made into a movie, but the setting is prerevolutionary Kiev. See *Iama,* directed by Svetlana Il'inskaia (1990). Mishka Iaponchik appears in the film *Déjà Vu,* directed by Juliusz Machulski (1988). There have been two movies based on Il'f and Petrov's Ostap Bender stories since the collapse of the USSR: *Dvenadstat' stul'ev,* directed by Maksim Papernik (2004); and *Zolotoi telenok,* directed by Ul'iana Shilkina (2005).
14. Kartsev, *Maloi, Sukhoi i Pisatel';* Sichkin, *Ia iz Odessy.*
15. Sichkin, *Ia iz Odessy,* 4–7.
16. On Odessa's bawdy, criminal, and Jewish music, see Grabovskii and Smirnov, *Poi, Odessa!;* and Teplish, *Odessa-zhemchuzhina u moria.* Most collections of Russian criminal folksongs contain a significant number of songs about Odessa. See, for instance, Toporkova, *Blatnaia pesnia;* Pentiukhov, *Pesni uznikov;* Starshinov, *Pesni nevoli;* and Kushaev, *Pesni prestupnogo mira.* The only published collections available before Glasnost were printed abroad. See, for instance, Vaiskopf, *Blatnaia lira.* For an overview of the publication history of anecdote collections, see chapter 4, this volume. *Akh Odessa!* regularly printed anecdotes, even reproducing ones that had first appeared in print in Odessa's prerevolutionary press. See, for instance, *Akh Odessa!,* no. 9 (May 1992), 7. As discussed in chapter 4, however, the Internet is the best source for criminal folksongs and anecdotes.
17. For photos and histories of Odessa's post-Soviet monuments, see the CD-ROM collection *Odessa: v novykh pamiatnikakh.*
18. The fiddler's name is Osip Kover. An interview with him can be found in *Akh Odessa!,* no. 13 (1992), 1, 4. I visited Gambrinus and saw him perform (accompanied by a keyboardist) in 2005. The subterranean tavern, however, was not filled with the sailors, cutthroats, and thieves described by Kuprin. The patrons largely consisted of a handful of middle-aged women who were dancing to the bawdy Yiddish-inflected criminal folksongs the musicians were performing.
19. The minibus tour, called "Criminal Odessa" (*Kriminal'naia Odessa*) is conducted by Valerii Netrebskii, who has also written a few popular histories about crime and intrigue in interwar Odessa, titled *NEPmanskaia Odessa* and *Sektretnye kvartaly Odessy.* Like most incarnations of the Odessa myth in the post-Soviet era, Netrebskii's tour narrative is a creative admixture of fact and fiction, particularly his segment on Benia Krik and Mishka Iaponchik. When I pressed him on certain specific points (such as chronology) he usually provided ambiguous responses. Many organizations, clubs, and informal groups conduct tours of Odessa's historic sites. See Richardson, *Kaleidoscopic Odessa.*
20. Kotler, *Ocherki,* 37. Local cultural activists in Odessa's Jewish community claim that between twenty thousand and forty thousand Jews remain in Odessa today.

21. Arbel, *Homage to Odessa,* 58.

22. The film *Little Odessa,* directed by James Gray (1994), is an American Jewish gangster movie set in Brighton Beach. Another film, *Odessa . . . Odessa!,* directed by Michale Boganim (2005), examines the emigration of Odessan Jewry to Israel and Brighton Beach, comparing life and culture in these two communities.

23. Walters, "Little Odessa File." In his short story, "Wedding in Brighton Beach," Emil' Dreitser describes how old Odessa has uprooted itself from the Black Sea and miraculously found a new home on the shores of the Atlantic. Emil' Dreitser, "Wedding in Brighton Beach," in Dreitser, *The Supervisor of the Sea and Other Stories,* 92–105.

24. Mikhail Zhvanetskii, "Vsemirnyi klub odessitov," in Zhvanetskii, *Moia Odessa,* 147–149.

25. Galina Vladimirskaia, "Iz istorii kluba," *Vsemirnyi klub odessitov,* http://www.odessitclub.org/club/club_history.htm.

26. The club's website, http://www.odessitclub.org, is among the most comprehensive and well organized of the many websites that commemorate old Odessa. *Vsemirnye odesskie novosti* is available electronically at http://www.odessitclub.org/publications/won/won_about.htm.

27. Many websites are dedicated to Odessa, its frivolous humor, and its notorious criminality, including http://www.ta-odessa.com, which has a section on humor and the Odessan language; http://www.odessaglobe.com, *Globus Odessa: The Worldwide Odessan Portal,* which contains news, information about the city, famous quotations about Odessa, excerpts of stories written by Konstantin Paustovskii, Isaac Babel, Valentin Kataev, Sholem Aleichem, and others, anecdotes, and songs; http://www.odessit.com, which, aside from the usual anecdotes and music, also offers photos of the city and recipes for "typical" Odessan cuisine; http://odessa.club.com.ua, *Odessika: An Encyclopedia about Odessa,* which features articles and memoirs written by Odessans about their city, including some from the nineteenth century; http://odessa-yumor.narod.ru, *Odessa Humor Navigator,* is dedicated to the city's wit and also serves as a portal to other Odessa-related websites; and http://www.odessitka.net, which contains interviews, songs, and photos. Most of these websites have interactive forums and invite visitors to submit their own anecdotes and songs. During the Soviet era, mythmaking had, in part, been a democratic, anonymous process through the creation and dissemination of anecdotes and criminal folksongs. The Internet, in many respects, is a medium through which this technique of mythmaking has been able to continue since the collapse of the USSR and the dispersal of Odessans across the globe.

28. *Edges of Odessa,* no. 1 (2005). The article on Iaponchik is a translated excerpt from Shkliaev, "Mishka Iaponchik."

29. Gorbachev, *October and Perestroika,* 18, 27.

30. Nove, *Glasnost´ in Action,* chap. 3.

31. Faitel'berg-Blank, *Banditskaia Odessa,* Vol. 1, *Dvoinoe dno Iuzhnoi Pal´miry,* by Viktor Faitel'berg-Blank and Valerii Shestachenko, 487. No evidence suggests that Mishka Iaponchik was known as Benia Krik during his lifetime. Isaac Babel probably invented this name, and it was only after the publication of his *Odessa Stories* that some mythmakers began to use the names Mishka Iaponchik and Benia Krik interchangeably. Konstantin Paustovskii conflated the two gangsters' names in his memoirs, published during the 1950s. See Paustovskii, *Years of Hope,* 125.

32. Krapiva, Kudrin, and Liumkis, *Odesskii satirikon,* 5.

33. Ibid.

34. Ibid., 11.

35. Ibid., 34.

36. Gubar', *Moe sobach´e delo,* 98.

37. Ibid., 154. "Southern Palmyra," like "Russia's Eldorado," was one of Odessa's nineteenth-century nicknames.

38. Krapiva, Kudrin, and Liumkis, *Odesskii satirikon,* 137.

39. Ibid., 137–139.

40. Anatolii Barbakaru's books include *Odessa-mama: kataly, kidaly, shulera; Gop-stop: odesskaia banditskaia; Va-bank, poslednii triuk kataly;* and *Zapiski shulera: troika, semerka, tuz.*

41. Odessa's mythmakers had romanticized Son'ka Zolotaia Ruchka during the prerevolutionary period, but, unlike Mishka Iaponchik, she rarely surfaced during the Soviet era. With Glasnost and the subsequent collapse of the USSR, mythmakers began to devote significant attention to her legendary escapades. See, for instance, Gubar', *Moe sobach´e delo,* 117–123; Krapiva, Kudrin, and Liumkis, *Odesskii satirikon,* 144–147; *Akh Odessa!,* no. 3 (February 1992), 7; no. 7 (April 1992), 6; no. 8 (April 1992), 7; Donskaia, *Sha!;* Drozdetskii, *Son´ka Zolotaia Ruchka;* and Kniazev, *Son´ka-Zolotaia Ruchka.*

42. Faitel'berg-Blank, *Banditskaia Odessa,* 1:254.

43. Krapiva, Kudrin, and Liumkis, *Odesskii satirikon,* 146.

44. Ibid., 147.

45. Smirnov, *Grob iz Odessy,* 50. *Gonef* is Hebrew and Yiddish for thief; *khochut* is a corruption of *khotiat,* the third-person plural conjugation of "to want" in Russian; *mide* is a corruption of the Yiddish (and German) *mit,* meaning "with."

46. It is worth noting that in Babel's original version of this story, "Korol'," it is a young messenger rather than Arye-Leib who warns Benia Krik of the impending police raid. Having Arye-Leib, an ostensibly pious and learned Jew, report directly to the king of the gangsters is another instance of post-Soviet mythmakers portraying old Odessa's criminal networks as more Jewish than they had ever been depicted before.

47. "Havah nagilah" is the principal song played at Jewish weddings and Bar Mitzvahs when the guests wildly dance the horah, with the bride and groom usually in the center and often lifted up on chairs. The 1926 film *Benia Krik* also juxtaposes the Jewish wedding with the scorching of the police station, but because it is a silent movie, its producers used a sequence of montages and intertitles to illustrate the connection between the two events.

48. Aleksandr Taubenshlak and Boris Eidel'man, "Ot izdatel'stva," in de Voland, *Moia zhizn´ v Rossii,* 5.

49. Eidel'man, *Iazyk Odessy.*

50. Mikhail Zhvanetskii, "Zdravstvui!" in Zhvanetskii, *Moia Odessa,* 137.

51. There are, of course, a handful of exceptions. Svetlana Donskaia's lyrical poetry about old Odessa suggests that the Bolshevik Revolution brought the Jewish city of sin to an end. Many of the commemorative volumes that have been produced abroad since Perestroika have also tended to focus on the prerevolutionary period. See, for instance, Iljine, *Odessa Memories;* Arbel, *Homage to Odessa;* and Vial, *La Mémoire d'Odessa.*

52. Faitel'berg-Blank, *Banditskaia Odessa,* 2:117–119.

53. Barbakaru, *Gop-stop,* 58.

54. Vesnik, *Khmel´nye stranichki dlia nep´iushchikh,* 86.

55. Ibid., 85–86.

56. Evgenii Golubovskii, "Posol ostrova Odessa," in Utesov, *Moia Odessa,* 7.

57. Vladimir Kavtorin, "Svobodnaia dusha epokhi," in Khmel'nitskii, *Vse khorosho prekrasnaia markiza,* 275.

58. Iablonovskaia and Shul'man, *Vospominaniia, vstrechi, portrety,* 29–30. A similar anecdote is told about Utesov's apparent immunity in the 1930s because of Stalin's supposed love of criminal folksongs. See Khmel'nitskii, *Vse khorosho prekrasnaia markiza,* 248–249. Although it is unclear whether these stories are true, they illustrate how Utesov himself has become part of the Odessa myth: a merrymaking charlatan who transcended the hierarchy and abstemious state-sponsored culture of Soviet socialism.

59. Poizner, *S Odessoi nado lichno govorit',* 19.

60. Ibid., 20. Odessans have been making jokes about cholera ever since Sholem Aleichem's Tevye the Dairyman said, "Let's talk about something more cheerful. Have you heard any news of the cholera in Odessa?" Sholem Aleichem, "Hodl," in Sholem Aleichem, *Tevye the Dairyman and the Railroad Stories,* 69. Valerii Smirnov discusses cholera's place in Odessa's history and culture in his *Bol'shoi polutolkovyi slovar' odesskogo iazyka,* 437. Zhvanetskii also wrote a skit about cholera in Odessa. See Zhvanetskii, "Kholera," in Zhvanetskii, *Moia Odessa,* 28–32.

61. Poizner, *S Odessoi nado lichno govorit',* 185, 24–26.

62. On the shifting temporal boundaries of old Odessa, see Tanny, "The Many Ends of Old Odessa."

Epilogue

1. Donskaia, *Sha!,* 9.
2. Rosenstone, *King of Odessa,* 231–232.
3. *Déjà Vu.*
4. Rosenstone, *King of Odessa,* 232.

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Numbers in italics refer to illustrations.

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