

Remapping Odessa, Rewriting Cultural History

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Remapping Odessa, Rewriting Cultural History

Steven J. Zipperstein

This is one of my Samuel and Althea Stroum Lectures delivered in May 1995 at the University of Washington, Seattle. It appears here with the permission of the University of Washington Press, which will publish a revised, fully documented version in a book entitled *Reimagining Russian Jewry*.

I'd like to go to the real Correctionville someday. I have been living and working as a writer in the other Correctionville, the one in my mind. I am constantly tinkering with the maps of the Midwest, trying to damp the distortions as much as possible while realizing that each selected vision of the place is a map more detailed than the thing it represents.

—Michael Martone, “Correctionville, Iowa,” in Kent C. Ryden, *Mapping the Invisible Landscape*

On Odessa's Richelieu Boulevard, near DeRibas (the “king” of streets in the words of Vladimir Jabotinsky), the Gessen' family prepares for breakfast. The father is a grain merchant (see his good address, fine attire, gruff, self-confident manner) in business with his father and brothers, who take commissions for the handling of grain shipped by river to Odessa and resold for export. Morning tea, a grim affair in this household, is punctuated by talk of business. Nearly all talk in this house is of business. The children escape this talk to play in the courtyard until their father gathers them in his carriage for the ride to school. Among them is Iosif' Vladimirovich'—born in 1866, later a

leader of the Cadets, the Russian liberal party—whose memoirs provide us with this glimpse of life at the Gessens'.

Young Gessen' remembers riding down streets packed with grain vendors calling to his father, some stopping the carriage and talking “rapidly and insistently” in the “Jewish jargon,” a language his father spoke but the children couldn’t understand. Hebrew they were taught, but it never made much sense to them. There were no books at home except school texts, prayer books, and, interestingly, the pamphlets produced by a poor “slightly mad” relative of their mother. This man was “constantly publishing, although he was poor as a church mouse. All the money he collected for the pamphlets, which he peddled himself, he used to publish new ones. What his daily bread was nobody knew and he did not seem to need any.”

Books in this house were, in effect, consigned to madmen. We’ll soon return to this theme.

By no means was this a Jewishly indifferent family—not by Odessa standards. Father was an officer of Odessa’s Great Synagogue; as stipulated by Jewish ritual, the family carefully cleared away all bread items from their home prior to the Passover festival and fasted on the Day of Atonement. Still, by the time young Gessen’ entered university, many in this social circle had converted to Christianity. There was something tedious about Jewish ritual he felt as a youth; in fact, the only moment of true passion he recalled was the terror that gripped his family at the prospect of economic catastrophe during the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–78, when the outlet from the Black Sea was closed and grain shipments disrupted. All that truly mattered was business. Jewish life was tepid, dry, and unmeaningful. Gessen’ writes:

[E]ven in my time, all these religious traditions began to fade. The little prayer scrolls were no longer hung upon the door frames to protect the homes from ill fortune. The touching and exciting reminiscences of the thousand-year long road of suffering became a dry conventionality, a tedious duty which one had to observe. Once it began, the assimilation of Russian culture progressed with giant strides.

Books as playthings, the stuff of eccentrics or worse; a life circumscribed by the heady demands of business, especially grain. “The commercial history of Odessa *is* the history of Odessa,” wrote the distinguished nineteenth-century local historian A. A. Skal’kovskii. One could begin, quite credibly, a cultural history of Jewish Odessa at the Gessens’ breakfast table, follow the family into the street, down Rishielevskaia, to work, (rarely) to play, to cafe, sporadically and listlessly to synagogue.

The materialism and the unusual opportunities available to Jews—who were the majority of leading grain exporters in Odessa, Russia's main grain-exporting port by mid-century—encouraged their mobility, ritual laxity, and acculturation. From the city's founding in 1794, Odessa's cultural institutions—a theater, later a splendid opera house—pulled at Jews, who were, at the same time, less constrained than their counterparts in most other large Jewish cities in Eastern Europe because of Odessa's distance from the centers of traditional Jewish culture. All these factors had their impact in shaping an unusual Jewish community. According to some estimates, by the 1870s 90 percent of the city's Jewish-owned shops (and Jews were very important in both local wholesale and retail trade) were open on the Sabbath. Hence, the Yiddish saying: "Seven miles around Odessa burn the fires of Hell."

A credible alternative to beginning a cultural tour of Jewish Odessa at the home of a well-situated grain merchant is to start at the workplace of a Jewish salesclerk (in 1905 the city counted about 26,000 such clerks, the vast majority of them Jews). Most were economically marginal men and women. They were compelled to dress well, which meant that many female salesclerks found themselves resorting to prostitution to supplement very meager incomes. Their hours of employment were unregulated by the state (in contrast to factory workers, for instance, who could be made to work no more than eleven and one-half hours daily); even when customers were not in the store, salesclerks were generally made to stand. The fate of such "white handed" workers (the Russian term for white-collar, nonmanual laborers) represented a rich part of urban folklore. Looking closely at them might help us rethink conflicting meanings of secularity, success, failure, health, as well as disease. They were, of course, immortalized by Isaak Babel: When one of gangster Benya Krik's men accidentally kills a Jewish clerk, Yosif Mugenstein, in Babel's short story "How It Was Done in Odessa," Benya dictates the terms of an absurdly lavish funeral where he himself delivers the oration: "Gentlemen and ladies, what did our dear Yosif get out of life? A couple of trifles. What was his occupation? He counted other people's money. . . . There are people already doomed to death, and there are people who haven't begun to live."

Clearly, a cultural history of Jewish Odessa that overlooks the nexus between economics and acculturation is inadequate, as I have appreciated since this city first captured my attention several years ago. Odessa's grain Casino, the local grain center, was arguably a Jewish "space" comparable, on its own terms, to the Vilna *shulhof*, that central courtyard in the old Jewish section of the "Jerusalem of Lithuania";

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both provided a spatial framework for communal coordination, informal chat as well as economic exchange.

Only the most rigid would insist that Jewish life in Odessa must be understood with the same analytic tools applied to older, more Jewishly stable, and traditional settings like Vilna, itself one of the very few positive images to emerge unsullied in the culturally fractious world of late-nineteenth-century East European Jewry. In hasidic circles, of course, Vilna remained throughout the nineteenth century a source of misgiving as an influential anti-hasidic stronghold. Elsewhere, though, it was roundly celebrated as an emblem both of rabbinic learning and modern Jewish scholarship, a place of study houses, streets informally named after biblical sites, distinguished book publishers, a city where even simple Jews spoke, or so it was often claimed, a language replete with midrashic allusion. Vilna, in contrast to Odessa, was said to be a good place: appropriately (depending on one's priorities) learned, pious, politically active, communally cohesive. An indication of this standing is Samuel Joseph Fin's *Kiryah Neemanah*, a history of Vilna published in 1860, the first history written of a Russian Jewish community and, indeed, one of the very first historical compositions written by a Russian Jew. "A prayer in every stone, a chant, a melody in every wall," as poet Moshe Kulbak would later write of Vilna. In contrast to boisterous Odessa—that unsettled city of newcomers—Vilna's Jewish population at the end of the century stood at about 60,000 (100,000 fewer Jews than in Odessa), a tightly organized, communally cohesive place, a city of 12,000 Jewish families that, or so we've been told, counted itself in families, not separate souls.

I mention all this to underline the importance of beginnings: how for a historian no less than for a writer of fiction like Babel the way one begins a narrative determines something (at times a good deal) of how it is told. It should be self-evident that the story of a city can be done in numerous ways depending—again, at least in part—on where one starts. This has little bearing necessarily on accuracy. Sources must be interpreted accurately, of course, but the historian may choose which to use, and such choices have a decisive impact on the texture and trajectory of the resulting narrative. Choosing one set of sources or narrative strategy over another depends on calculations of historical priority, transparency, and significance. All these are—in large and small ways—influenced by individual inclinations that the historian can't always be aware of.

Stuart Hampshire puts these rather self-evident truisms well, with an interesting twist at the end, and I've reflected on his shrewd observation while writing this article: "The significance of a writer, whether poet or

philosopher or historian, and that which makes him worthy of study now, commonly does not reside principally in the conscious intention behind his work, but rather in the precise nature, as we can now see it, of the conflicts and the imaginative inconsistencies in his work."

In this vein, I interrogate my abiding fascination with Odessa. I construct this essay around texts that helped me determine how to start the telling of its story. My relationship with these texts (mostly maskilic, or Jewish enlightenment in nature) has long been complicated, usually adversarial, as I have understood it, in that I found them useful for their social and cultural evidence and nearly always problematic in their assumptions about the city and (as most of them asserted) its cultural deficiencies.

To understand what I mean—and my predicament, at least in this respect, can be seen as somewhat typical of writers of Russian Jewish history until the opening of archival material in the former USSR in the last three or four years—remember that those of us who write about the Russian Jewish past have for much of this century been dependent on mostly printed sources located almost entirely in the West. Archival research in the Soviet Union was closed to Judaica scholars, and the bulk of available material—the sort of material on which my own history of Odessa Jewry was built—is almost exclusively in the form of press, newspapers, and journals, Jewish and non-Jewish. Fortunately, there was a vast periodical press in imperial Russia, with Jewish newspapers in a range of languages: Russian, Hebrew, and Yiddish. Still, articles in this press were skewed often in rather predictable ways and, as printed sources, were sometimes heavily censored (or self-censored) and nearly all produced by intellectuals of one sort or another.

The intellectuals and so-called half-intellectuals (*polu-intelligenty*) responsible for writing this material nearly always, as it happens, viewed Odessa in much the way that twentieth-century intellectuals have tended to see Los Angeles: vapid, flamboyant, mercenary, all-too-enticing. Exceptions are rare, and also self-conscious of how they break the mold. Isaak Babel is one; Vladimir Jabotinsky (who wrote the unusual celebration of Jewish businessmen in Odessa) is another. In any event, the primary sources on Odessa Jewry until the opening of Russian and Ukrainian archives in the last few years were the numerous newspaper and journal articles by writers who, on the whole, loathed, or at least patronized, the city. Imagine a history of Los Angeles without access to local archives and guided mainly by the dark ruminations on L.A. of Berthold Brecht or Nathaniel West. I exaggerate, but not wildly.

The dean of Russian Jewish historiography, Simon Dubnow, called Odessa "the least historical of all cities," and he lived there for the most

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fertile years of his scholarly and publicistic life between 1890 and 1903. This city, insisted Dubnow, essentially had no history, and what it did have was wrong: crass, commercial, brash, and irrelevant. Such judgments were, I insisted when I wrote my first book, misleading historically. If it was commerce that had a decisive impact on local culture—with the demands of commerce openly fueling the building of the famed Odessa opera house, the Lyceum, and local museums—this should be analyzed, not excoriated.

I revisit here two memoirs and one Hebrew novel, and all of these hold the city accountable for failing in one way or another to live up to hegemonic, abstract standards set mainly by the urban exemplar of Vilna: a cerebral, learned place valued by rabbinic scholar and so-called enlightened Jew alike. What I find surprising in rereading these sources after several years is how sympathetic I find them, the extent to which I concur (and probably always concurred) with at least some of their more important assumptions about Odessa. These assumptions are, I understand, rigid, probably excessively so. They assume a preference for a bookish, literate culture and view boisterous, materialistic Odessa from the margins, from the vantage point of intellectuals who, when thinking about the place, are rendered glum, envious, and scandalized, outside in the cold. This is, I now realize, uncannily similar to my own thinking about the place. And, ironically, it is for this reason that I have long remained fixated on the city as a cultural signpost in contemporary Jewish life.

First, a sketch written by Elhonan Levinsky, an Odessa hebraist of note, a member of the entourage of the Jewish nationalist cultural leader Ahad Ha'am. In a 1896 essay called "City of Life," he reflects on what might be called the wages of cultural space in Jewish Odessa.

He begins by telling how he finds himself passing sometimes with sadness a building on Langeron Street, a bustling cafe that a few years earlier had been a reading room. Here, for a mere five kopecks, a reader could sit all day with the world's best literature. The room nearly always was empty. A newcomer to Odessa, he queried its owner as to why, in a city full of "men of enlightenment and readers of books," it couldn't attract more readers, and the proprietor answered with what now seemed to Levinsky an uncanny prescience. He said that if he opened a cafe it would be packed. Odessa Jews enjoy, as he put it, boisterous activity, rich food, and harsh coffees, never books. Even when a couple of poor Jews meet on the street, the information they exchange is about the current price of the rouble. Hence, the city's cultural institutions, impressive from afar, languish from neglect. Donations from the local rich are erratic and meager.

Still musing on the now-thriving cafe, Levinsky remarks how the same remoteness from learning and high culture leave their stamp on local Jewish life. Judaism here is a spectator sport, a passive exercise in curiosity, quaint, even kitsch. This is what he describes when he brings us to a city park in the early evening with its minstrels and other delights. Here is a Jewish minstrel named Davidov singing ditties he calls “the songs of the Jews,” telling stories from the lives of the Jews, and dancing Jewish dances. On stage surrounded by laughing patrons, Davidov dons a prayer shawl and phylacteries, drawing into the act Gentiles as well as Jews with the assurance that they too, if they wish, can be good, kosher Jews just like him. The crowd loves him, Jews and non-Jews alike crying for more, begging him to tell more stories from the Jewish past. The Jews of Odessa, Levinsky writes, are the first to pay good money for the sheer pleasure (as he puts it) of having “dirty water” tossed in their faces. Predictably, Levinsky, a native of Lithuania, compares these odd, troubling features of life to conditions back home and, in comparison, the Black Sea port comes out looking awful.

My second prooftext is an appraisal of Mendele Mocher Seforim in turn-of-the-century Odessa. By then Mendele had achieved, as is well known, an extraordinary standing in East European Jewry as its greatest writer of Hebrew as well as Yiddish prose. The best proof of this stature and popularity is his 1909 lecture tour throughout the East European region, the grandest tour of a Jewish writer of the time. Even the sardonic David Frischman (probably the most dour Jewish literary critic of the time in the Russian empire) observed that no Jewish writer had before encountered such a reception:

The “triumphal tour” went from Vilna to Bialystok, from Bialystok to Warsaw, from Warsaw to Lodz. No other writer—Jew or Gentile—has ever been accorded such an honor. It was the journey of a duke. Thousands of people waited at each train station, thousands of people jostled and pushed each other to approach him, happy if they managed to shake his hand or even just catch a glimpse of his face.

Presumably Odessa, where Mendele had lived since 1880 as director of the local, educationally innovative talmud torah, treated him similarly. Imagine the surprise of writer Yitzhak Dov Berkowitz, son-in-law of Sholem Aleichem, when, as a newcomer to Odessa, he finds Mendele wandering the city streets for hours without being recognized, gathering much of the material for his fiction, spying on conversations. Mendele could do this with efficiency because, though lionized elsewhere, he walked Odessa’s streets relatively unnoticed. Perhaps

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Berkowitz exaggerates. His sense of Mendele's predicament (which, as it happens, is how Mendele, too, saw the situation) remains revealing. Berkowitz writes:

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Mendele would go and walk around in Odessa and there were very few of the local population who knew that he was the old, honored man. And if there was someone who happened to remark that this was Mendele, the news would seem entirely strange: Mendele? Who is this Mendele? A hasidic rebbe? A good, pious Jew? A wonderworker? What is this sort of person doing in Odessa?

I'll return to what I think this means in a moment. My final example—this one more lengthy—is, among other things, further testimony to how firmly Vilna had imposed itself on the Jewish cultural imagination, defining in the process what responsible, credible cultural change was, and what it wasn't. I refer to Reuven Braudes's 1888 novel *Shete ha-ketsavot* (The Two Extremes), described by literary historian Joseph Klausner as the first significant novel in the Hebrew language. Here we find a series of interlinked tales, at whose core is the story of a very wealthy, young hasid who comes to Odessa and, without so much as reading a line of a serious book (he does dip into a few poems and stories of romance), is transformed. True, he manages to teach himself to read music to play a flute, but this is his closest brush with high culture. Braudes intends for us to see hasid Yaakov Hetzron's transformation as a tale of cultural change gone wrong; indeed, at the novel's end he is saved, rendered suitably modern by a Vilna Jew who rescues him from the rudderless change characteristic of Odessa, devoid of intellectual underpinnings.

Of the very few unequivocal heroes in this book—Jews of moderate appetite with healthy respect for modernity as well as tradition—nearly all come from Vilna. They attempt to influence wayward souls, to translate maskilic Vilna's chief message: careful, cerebral, muted reform and, above all, the primacy of ideas.

We first meet hasidic protagonist Yaakov Hetzron a week after his arrival in Odessa, sitting in Alexandrovskii Park overlooking the sea, looking out at the water and contemplating its power and mystery: "A precious sight, a very lovely sight. Here, he saw beauty face to face; here splendor and order met; loveliness and regimen joined together. . . . It brought his soul down to the very depths and made his heart throb. The beauty of the city was beyond estimation." In what is a rather rambling novel, Yaakov himself doesn't really move much beyond this point. True, he leaves the seaside perch, and we follow him into mid-

dle-class drawing rooms and, with particular frequency, to the home of the merchant Achitov, whose daughter Liza wins his heart. Emotionally, though, Yaakov is fixed throughout the novel at much the same point we first encounter him. He is, in fact, a remarkably passive fellow who is brought in tow place after place by the novel's true villain, his attorney Yurav (a linguistic play, I think, on the biblical sinner Jeroboam, the son of Nebat). Yurav takes him to cabarets and bars, as well as to middle-class salons, and it is there—not in the time-honored, canonized maskilic routine that begins cultural modernization with a reading of Moses Mendelssohn, Spinoza, or Moshe Leib Lilienblum—it is in such rooms and not in libraries that Yaakov is made over: "His faith died a painless death, without any battle, without anguish of heart and soul."

Yaakov is taken early in the novel to the concert hall, but we aren't told what he hears; the joy is in sitting in a marvelous room with *sarim ve-sarot* (dignitaries, male and female), close to his beloved Liza. He spends his waking hours wandering streets and parks in search of Liza; the characters in the novel, the males especially, rarely seem to sleep a full night, the least stressful encounter triggering bouts of sleeplessness. Liza herself is a rather unexceptional soul: manipulative, fickle, without, it seems, much affection for Yaakov. She comes alive mostly in Yaakov's fervid, sleep-deprived mind. Much here is abstraction, especially love: "Love. Love for a girl! A new word and a new feeling for Yaakov Hetzron. A feeling he had never known before today, nor had he ever heard the word until now." He learns about love from books, and the only books he reads during his stay in Odessa are romances. In a splendid subversion of a Jewish enlightenment motif, it is venal Yurav who plies Yaakov with literature—cheap, dime-store novels that corrupt his soul.

Braudes, an innovative novelist, is aware of what he is doing when he has the manipulative cad Yurav lead Yaakov to the only books he reads in Odessa. This bout of reading follows in the wake of a motivational speech of Yurav's in which he insists (in mock-maskilic fashion) that his hasidic friend must broaden his horizons with literature. It is tawdry books that reshape his vocabulary and behavior as an alternate *Shulchan Aruch*, of sorts, setting down specifications for behavior and speech alike.

There are still worse problems in paradise: Yaakov, who has posed as a childless widower, is actually a married man with children back home in his native townlet Sukkoth. Eventually he is found out. Yurav presses him to divorce his wife and marry Liza, whose father (a client of Yurav's threatened with bankruptcy) would be saved by a rich son-in-law. This is why Yurav has been plying the hasid with romance literature: to excite Yaakov with the promise of love so that he throws his family overboard for Liza.

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The plot thickens further when Liza's brother, exhausted by the frivolities of life in Odessa, and especially his empty, self-seeking wife, arranges to have himself sent on business to Sukkoth. There he is moved by the dignity of Jewish ritual practice (of which he knows precious little, it seems), and he is overwhelmed by the—quite literally—unvarnished beauty of Sukkoth's women. In contrast to Yaakov's introduction at the seashore, we first meet Shlomo in Sukkoth at the Sabbath table. Here, again, a telling feature of this text is its examination of the differences in Jewish "space" in big city and townlet, as reflected in each journey's beginning.

Shlomo promptly falls in love with a commendable young woman in Sukkoth, Yaakov's sister-in-law Shifra. Shlomo encounters—and, of course, is appalled by—the fanaticism of the place, but he dallies, unwilling to take up again his old life in Odessa. Yaakov remains in Odessa where eventually he learns that the city's glitter hides an ugly, rapacious side. In the end, a decorously enlightened Vilna Jew, a long-lost relative, sets everyone on course: he even teaches Yaakov's hasidic wife proper grooming techniques, whereupon she dazzles her ever-impressionable husband when she sweeps into town.

This is, as the title warns us, a study in extremes: Odessa and Sukkoth; Liza's brother Shlomo and the erstwhile hasid Yaakov; Liza and the modest, literate Shifra. In the midst of this chaos, long-lost relatives surface to reclaim progeny, errant husbands and wives are reconciled, Yaakov comes to see Odessa as the frivolous place we always knew it to be, and the novel ends with a promise of reconciliation between the otherwise jagged sides of Jewish life.

Odessa here is, by and large, a place that tears people apart: it turns monsters like Yurav loose to corrupt the weak and impressionable. It bewitches Yaakov into thinking he has found happiness; it promises easy pleasure and riches; it persuades the naive and incredulous that its physical beauty represents something profound. In Sukkoth, a benighted place, there is still the Sabbath; in Odessa, there are cheap thrills, momentary pleasures, sensuous, startling glimpses of sea or urban paradise that yield little beyond themselves.

When many years ago I first read *Shete ha-ketsavot*, it helped shape my impression that writing about this city required different analytic tools than might be necessary for other East European Jewish communities. Thus one would avoid an exaggerated reliance on the influence of books, intellectuals, and self-conscious cultural production. I remain convinced that this is true. 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 a part of the city's Jewish story.

Consequently, or so I then assumed, I used maskilic, or enlightenment, sources in order to unsettle their assumptions about the city and what it represented in modern Jewish life. The story of the intellectuals themselves was an epiphenomenon in a historical analysis whose trajectory began elsewhere: in the grain Casino, so to speak, rather than in the study. This is how I understood until recently the intention of my work—an attempt to tease out of mostly maskilic texts what could be learned about the city's economic and social life, its high as well as its popular culture.

It was sitting three years ago in the State Archives in Odessa, housed in what was until the 1920s the once prestigious Brodskaia Synagogue (whose history I was the first to reconstruct in my book), that I recognized, rather vaguely initially, that I had not been altogether frank with myself about what most interested me about this city. I sat surrounded by far more archival material on Odessa Jews than could be absorbed in ten lifetimes: banking records of its wealthiest Jews, transcripts of its Jewish organizational meetings, commercial records dating back to the immigration of several hundred Jewish merchants from Galicia in the 1820s who had a considerable commercial as well as cultural impact on local Jewish life, police reports describing the daily routine (not surprisingly, rather mundane) of physician and proto-Zionist leader Leon Pinsker.

It was now that I realized, handling material suddenly and easily accessible to me, that much of what was in my possession did not provide me with the sort of knowledge that had sustained my interest in the city over the years. Here, again, we return to matters of origin: how a story is shaped by the way it begins. It now became clear to me that my fascination with Odessa remained focused still, oddly enough, on the same intellectuals whose shavings of cultural reality, whose artifacts, I had reviewed in the past mostly for reasons of utility—or so I thought.

I had relied primarily on their sources because, I assumed, so little else was available on which to base an assessment of life in this city. It now became clear, once the Russian archival material that I had sought for years was made readily accessible, that what intrigued me most about this city was the relationship that intellectuals had with it. For years this awkward, unsettling relationship had provided me, as I now see it, with a metaphor for something still larger, for the often tenuous relationship in contemporary life between self-conscious producers of ideas and the larger community of Jews. Odessa was for me, above all,

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a splendid prism through which to study a poignant, and culturally crucial, relationship in modern Jewish life, and the extent to which I might now use newly available archival material on the city would probably be to explicate much the same historical problems in terms, say, of the relationship between female intellectuals and the larger Jewish sphere. Otherwise, the city—beautiful, though it was—held little compelling fascination for me.

In other words, I had long believed that my goal as a historian, difficult as this was without access to archives, was to tell the story of Odessa Jews from its center: from the vantage point of its merchants, its business community, its sturdy, well-funded institutions, its confident, acculturated Jews. But I now see that what most intrigued me all along was life at its margins: the city as seen through the eyes of its maskilic newcomers, young men from the provinces, to recycle Lionel Trilling's still-suggestive phrase (with newly accessible archives providing, I suspect, much about their female counterparts), who come to town with grand expectations and who are disappointed in the worst of ways. They are disappointed not by fanatics (a rather tepid, unpowerful lot here) whose familiar attentions would, in any event, have been flattering. Rather, our maskilim, our heroes inspired by Jewish enlightenment aspirations, encounter the terrible, numbing sensation of being rendered irrelevant with few interested readers, a communal establishment neither shocked nor, for that matter, much interested, and (perhaps this was most hurtful) modern, progressive youth who look right past them. Here, in a place that was the most "modern" in Russian Jewry, or so they had come to believe, maskilic intellectuals found that they had within the span of a short train ride of a day or two passed from small-town notoriety to irrelevance. Back home, they were the worst of transgressors. Now, in a place where there were publishers, jobs, schools, even freedom from hecklers—here there was little apparent need for them.

The stuff of tragedy, a grim signpost in contemporary Jewish life: the *tref posul*, that forbidden book so dangerous and enticing elsewhere, no longer threatens here. This is because scholars, whether traditional or modern, no longer intimidate. Isn't there something unsettling in this, if only in its familiarity?

Odessa Jewry's story, as I now recognize I've been inclined to tell it, begins neither at the commercial exchange nor the port, not even in the city itself but on the train. I begin with a passenger, a young maskil, an erudite lapsed *mitnaged* or hasid, a peripatetic youth from Lithuania or the Ukraine. The Hebrew writer Jacob Fichman writes of his own journey: "I stood nearly the entire night beside an open train carriage

window breathing the fragrance of the dark, vast southern steppe.” He comes from a primitive place with few good books, some comraderie, much darkness. He sits, barely able to contain himself because he is on his way to Odessa.

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The train trip is a crucial part of his spiritual journey, as recalled in memoirs written years later. It is almost always the longest distance he has traveled; it offers his first sense of the world’s immensity, of his life as an unfolding adventure, of a real distance from the battlefield of his adolescence. He will soon see the Black Sea. Still more exciting, he will be near (or so he hopes) to the “wise men of Odessa”—the so-called *hakhmei Odessa*—those arbiters of good taste, culture, and politics. He imagines himself sitting at the poet Bialik’s table, in publicist Ahad Ha’am’s sitting room, holding in his hands the galleys of his own articles or poetry, praised by giants. He feels joy, fear, ambition, overpowering expectation: he steps off the train into the night air smelling of greenery.

It is young Jewishly preoccupied *intelligenty*, like Fichman, hungry to escape the world of their fathers and mothers (and no less eager for an embrace)—intellectuals who rush off to Odessa from their parental homes as angry rebels and, once there, readily adopt the designation of Mendele as their “grandfather” and Sholem Aleichem (or, for that matter, Ahad Ha’am) as their “father”—such ambivalent, ambiguous modernists have been for many years my main interest. Odessa fascinates me as a backdrop to these lives, as a setting for an extraordinary and ironic encounter. Here they come fleeing the shackles of small-town Jewish life with a sense of urgency to do their part in creating a new understanding of Judaism in modernity. They produce much of their best work here in a place that inspires and horrifies them.

There is a moment, in the late 1880s and early 1890s, when an unusually talented pool of “transitional” or maskilic intellectuals, writers mostly of Hebrew or Yiddish eager to leave their mark on Jewish life, arrive in Odessa. This group has a small inner circle of no more than twenty young men (the one woman who belongs, Maria Saker, is typically little known), and these intellectuals quickly set themselves apart from those they designate as their inferiors and whom they manage, quite effectively, to write out of history.

Later, when they and their literary heirs reconstructed the Russian Jewish past—once they resettled in post-World War I Berlin, Tel Aviv, and elsewhere—they recalled Mendele and his circle as situated at the center of local Jewish cultural life. Beginning in the 1920s, once the collected works of Mendele and other writers in this literary stable were codified, it was this collective memory of what had transpired in Odessa (along, ironically, with sweeping denunciations of the city) that was

imposed on twentieth-century Jewry and, in the absence of a culturally active Russian Jewry in the Soviet Union, these images would remain on the whole uncontested.

When we look at this circle in Odessa at their prime, however, we find intellectual pioneers with the saddest of voices. Dubnow, an often shrewd observer (and often a better journalist than historian), saw this when he reviewed in a well-known article an early publicistic venture of this group, the journal *Kaveret* of the late 1880s. In *Kaveret* and elsewhere, this circle communicated the sense that as crucial as their tasks were—they saw themselves as doing little less than reconstructing a now-threatened Jewish civilization—they would most probably fail. The reasons for their pessimism had little to do with antisemitism, *per se*. Countervailing cultural forces in the West as well as in Russia were, simply, too powerful, the pull of the larger world too strong. This response is more than merely idiosyncratic: it was not merely that Bialik resisted the crown of the national poet (which, of course, he assiduously courted, as well), that Ahad Ha'am's depressions got the better of him, or that Mendele resented all political camps and designations and poked fun at them all. Rather, their pessimism was something of a cultural trademark, a defining feature of the time and place and their response to them.

Their ideologies, among the most influential in twentieth-century Jewish life, were conceived against this backdrop of abiding loss. Like Levinsky, who admits he cannot help but return to the site of that once empty private lending library and look in at the now garrulous crowd inside—a scene, as he describes it, of loneliness and embarrassment—I too find the marginality of Odessa's intellectuals a cruel source of fascination. In a place that they had fully expected to conquer, they lived as something of a colony, spying on street-corner performers, on clowns whose impact on local Jewry was, as they understood it, more decisive than theirs because these performers had somehow managed to transmute Jewish culture into something both vague and, surprisingly, facile.

Lonely now for the first time in their lives, or so they assert often (Moses Leib Lilienblum's memoirs, *Hatot Neurim*, provide one of Hebrew literature's best portraits of big-city ennui in its depiction of his first years in Odessa), these intellectuals evoke a longing of their own for the self-contained Jewish towns where they were once shunned, persecuted, and also important. The sadness in their writings is inspired by the view of what they left behind from the perspective of their new, painfully marginal urban perch. Not that they can forget altogether the bite of small-town fanaticism. Still, its veneration for those who write

and its respect for those who read are all the more apparent to them now; they sense it might well prove impossible in Odessa to construct a credible modernized version of Judaism that could be sturdy enough to sustain the burden. Ahad Ha'am gave the impression publicly of an austere, almost eerie self-confidence. Yet take a look at one of his first pieces, written in the volume *Kaveret* before his famous essay "Lo zeh ha-derekh" (This Is Not the Way). This semiautobiographical piece "Ketavim balim" (A Tattered Manuscript) is an elegy:

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Steven J.
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Remapping
Odessa,
Rewriting
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But what am I now? A maskil? I cannot say that with certainty. Still now, in the moments before the end of the Sabbath, between the time that the sun sets and one begins lighting candles once again, I love to sit in a corner in the dark and examine the range of my feelings. In such moments, I feel my soul rising heavenward, as if my spiritual elation has emerged from within me to the sound of heavenly voices, and I recall various memories of my youth, memories that make me laugh, pleasant recollections—recollections that please me very much. . . . Sometimes my lips will open as if by themselves, and I find myself chanting some well-known melody in a hushed voice. . . . During those long winter evenings, at times when I'm sitting in the company of enlightened men and women, sitting at a table with tref food and cards, and my heart is glad and my face bright, suddenly then—I don't know how this happens—suddenly before me is a very old table with broken legs, full of tattered books (*sefarim balim*), torn and dusty books of genuine value, and I'm sitting alone in their midst, reading them by the light of a dim candle, opening up one and closing another, not even bothering to look at their tiny print . . . and the whole world is like the Garden of Eden.

The table is broken, the books dusty, tattered; his joy in reading them is incomparable. He imagines the scene with fierce longing because there is, of course, now an unbridgeable distance between him and that world which he can never reenter. Nor, for that matter, would he wish to. Still, the vacuous scene in which he now finds himself (with its drink, cards, a hint of promiscuity) is contrasted with the *beis medresh*, this idyll. Past and also future are reconfigured; the distance between books sacred and profane is collapsed. Having seen what Odessa has wrought, he imagines a conservative utopia: a return to a time when joy was in study, when authority was in the hands of those who best read texts, when the boundaries of what was and wasn't Jewish were—or, at least appeared to be—self-evident.

"Just wait until now becomes then. You'll see how happy we were," writes Susan Sontag. Many of the same *hakhmei Odessa* ("wise men" like

[36] Dizengoff, Ahad Ha'am, Ravnitsky) would later seek to impose much the same vision and create from scratch in the sand dunes near ancient Jaffa a city inspired both by what Odessa was and, more important, by what it was not—a seaside utopia, a homogeneously Jewish but (as they saw it) liberal kingdom with its emblem of literacy, its gymnasium, at the center of the town. This elite school was at its topographical—and ideological—center as the earliest maps of this suburb show; Ahad Ha'am, the moral philosopher of a reconstructed bourgeois, secular Jewishness, was placed in a house around the corner from the school in what was to be a world of comfortable burghers and literate, urban Jews. This Mediterranean Hampstead Garden suburb was, of course, quickly transformed in the mid-1920s by tens of thousands of Jews, mostly small shopkeepers and artisans from Poland, who built a nervous, vibrant town that without premeditation shunted aside the plans of its intellectual founders. The city grew; the gymnasium, stuck at one of its now-remote corners, was leveled; a Hebrew-speaking culture of a different sort emerged.

“Writing what you know has nothing to do with security: What is more dangerous?” asks Eudora Welty. Writing at the margins, I gain sustenance from those in the past whose frustrations and achievements, whose limitations and biases, whose relationship to community and work help me contextualize my own. “Forget for a while that you’ve got spectacles on your nose and autumn in your soul. Stop raising hell at your desk and stammering in public,” instructs Isaak Babel’s Aryeh Leib, musing on the Odessa cemetery wall telling of the life of that noble savage Benya Krik. Those unable to follow this impossible dictum—ironic fare that Babel himself was far from sure ought to be followed—sit scribbling, as he himself did, writing about what we love most and about what is most unsettling, which, if you’re doing what you should, amounts to much the same thing.