

# FAREWELL, MAMA ODESSA

A NOVEL

EMIL DRAITSER



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## FROM THE AUTHOR

In 1967, after the Six-Day War between Israel and Arab countries, the Soviet Union, which supported the Arabs, broke diplomatic relations with Israel. While the Israeli victory became a source of pride for Soviet Jews, it caused the Soviet government to launch an anti-Zionist (read: antisemitic) campaign inside the country. This development came on top of a double whammy for Soviet Jews. Like all Soviet citizens, they led the hopeless lives of disenfranchised people, while also being subjected to official discrimination, regulated by secret instructions, in getting higher education and employment.

Pressured by human rights campaigns on a global scale, especially in America, to allow Jewish emigration, and dependent on trade with the West and Western technology to sustain their stagnant economy, the Soviet powers-that-be raised the Iron Curtain a bit. To save the Soviet system's ideological face ("no one in their right mind wants to leave the best country in the world!"), the government used the facade of "family reunification." Soviet Jews could receive invitations from nonexistent relatives in Israel, which made them eligible to apply for emigration.

Suddenly, it became advantageous to be a Jew in a country that had long practiced discrimination of its Jewish minority. Some Soviet citizens searched their genealogical tree in hope to find some Jewish branch or at least a leaf. A black market of bogus marriages to Jews flourished.

To pretend any Jew who wants to emigrate would be given permission and, at the same time, to slow down the avalanche of applications, the Soviet government created artificial barriers. It met all those who dared to submit emigration papers with state-sponsored ostracism and reinforced bureaucratic red tape, bringing about unwarranted scrutiny. To

make it hard to receive such permission, a prospective applicant had to submit a character reference from his place of employment. Often, their bosses subjected them to public humiliation. They called an employees' general meeting where the coworkers shamed them for betrayal of the great Soviet Motherland.

To make granting permission to leave the country unpredictable, they turned the applicants down by citing state security reasons. Thus, a vocal community of refuseniks came into being.

Starting in 1970, the émigrés lucky enough to receive permission headed for Vienna. Those who lived in Moscow or Leningrad could fly there; all others traveled by train to the border station Chop (pronounced to rhyme with “hope”). After going through customs, they took a train to Vienna with a transfer in Bratislava (then Czechoslovakia). Upon arriving in Vienna, all émigrés had a choice. They could proceed to Israel or, if they chose another country, such as the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, or South Africa, they boarded a train to Rome. They stayed in Rome and its vicinities until the entry visas to the country of their choice were processed. Nearly two million Jews emigrated before the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991.

For us, Soviet Jews, the question of where we were going was not the main issue. We didn't care so much where we were going—to Israel, Canada, Australia, the United States. We only cared about whether we were leaving—our main concern was getting out.

It was a risky venture. None of us had any idea what the future had in store. After being stripped of our Soviet citizenship, we couldn't go back. There was no sign the system would ever change. The Soviet Union seemed impregnable, and destined to last forever. We were out on our own, with our skills, our wits, and our terrible inadequacies. And no money.

On behalf of the American government, two nongovernmental organizations, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) and the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (the Joint), supported us on our way out of the Soviet Union.

The Soviet emigration had a significant impact on the USA, bringing to its shores the progenitors of future talents: gifted scientists, world-class mathematicians, brilliant movie and TV stars, virtuoso musicians, the future inventors of Google, PayPal, and WhatsApp, scores of young

Russian-American writers, and, at one time, the entire US Olympic Chess Team.

This book is my attempt to create a collective portrait of those who took the risk of jumping into the abyss of the unknown, and fled the Soviet Union. It addresses the formidable problem of assimilating to a world so different from the one they had known all their lives. They all faced this new world—full of different cultural assumptions, a distinct economic structure, and an unfamiliar political life based on democratic, not totalitarian, principles.

There was another problem, unforeseen, a question of self-identification. In the Soviet Union, a person was considered to be a Jew based on his or her ethnicity rather than religion. Soviet internal passports included a line (the so-called “fifth item”) which identified its holder’s ethnicity, e.g., Russian, Ukrainian, Armenian, Jewish, etc. It served the same purpose as the Star of David patch in Nazi Germany—it facilitated singling out Jews. At the same time, several generations of official atheism in the Soviet Union had resulted in an atheistic population, creating a society of non-believers. It led to confusion when Jewish émigrés arrived in the West, especially in the United States, where people are identified as Jews by their religion.

**I**n this collective portrait of Jewish emigration from the USSR, I also try to tell my story. I talk about what drove me to make that fateful decision, what I experienced amid filling out forms, packing my bags, and saying farewell to people and places I had known all my life. When the idea to write about all these things came, over four decades had passed since my emigration. I could write about myself in the autobiographical style, using the first person, but this time it didn’t feel right. The young man who left Russia back in 1974 is not the man I am today by any stretch of the imagination. So, I did something different. I wrote about myself in the third person and as two separate characters, the first, Boris Shuster, a young man going through the life-changing upheaval of emigration, the second, his older cousin Ilya, who emigrated to America a few years before Boris and is more settled. Both characters have the same childhood experiences, which mirror my own.

Only three people appear in these pages under their real names. One is my hometown friend, the Odessan poet Leonid Mak; the two others are the American human rights activists Si Frumkin (now deceased) and Zev

Yaroslavsky (now a professor at UCLA's Luskin School of Public Affairs). Many Russian Jewish émigrés, myself included, are forever indebted to these two men for their tireless efforts on our behalf.

The issues facing today's refugees have caused me to reflect on the years of my emigration. Although leaving your native land forever is a tragic event in any human's life, in my case, it's a tragedy that took place more than forty years ago. Often, drama becomes comedy with time. This is why some émigré stories I've included have a lighter tone to them. This assessment comes from the later-day awareness that, unlike the biblical exodus, the passage to the modern-day Promised Land took not forty years, but hardly more than a few months. Unlike their ancestors, the new arrivals weren't born free while roaming over the biblical desert. They still bore the brand of their totalitarian upbringing, and thought and acted accordingly. Climbing out from under the Iron Curtain, they jumped into the abyss of the unknown for the sake of their children and grandchildren, for the sake of giving them a chance to grow up in the Land of the Free.

I'd like to express my gratitude to Adrian Wanner of Pennsylvania State University, Konstantin Kustanovich of Vanderbilt University, and Gavriel Shapiro of Cornell University for their thoughtful reading of my manuscript, valuable feedback, and support of my work. Of course, any factual mistakes in this work are due to my own oversight.

On the writing stage, I received a lot of help from my friends and colleagues. Jennie Redling and Dr. Gary Kern read portions of the manuscript and gave me their valuable feedback. Emily Corvi worked on making sure my native-speaker Russian accent didn't obscure the narrative. Martin Weiss helped to make some Russian cultural tropes comprehensible to American readers. The last, not the least, my brother, Vladimir, was irreplaceable when it came to fighting computer glitches, which always tend to occur in most critical moments. To all my helpers, I'd like to express here, as they say it in Odessa, a "great Russian *merci*" (*bol'shoe russkoe merci*.)



**FAREWELL, MAMA ODESSA**

# PROLOGUE

At the end of the eighteenth century, to secure access to the warm waters of the Black Sea, which made possible year-round navigation, Catherine the Great founded the port of Odessa. Not unlike New York, from its outset it turned into a melting pot of many nationalities. No wonder that when Mark Twain visited it back in 1867, he made a startling discovery. “I have not felt so much at home for a long time as I did when I . . . stood in Odessa for the first time,” Twain writes in his *Innocents Abroad*. “It looked just like an American city . . . Look up the street or down the street, this way or that way, we saw only America! There was not one thing to remind us that we were in Russia.”

French aristocrats on the run from their revolution planned, erected, and lent their names to Odessa—Duc de Richelieu, Alexandre-Louis de Langeron, Frantz de Volan, and many others. French city rulers, military leaders, architects, engineers, and other masters of trades lived here with their servants and retinue for long stretches of time. Affectionate, they filled the city with many descendants. The easygoing Gallic attitude toward life, the French wit, and a cheerful nature have poured over from their blood into the city itself. Laughter splashes about in Odessans’ throats like a young wine in the throats of the inhabitants of a Provencal village.

Thus, Odessans are the French of Ukraine. They are also the Ukrainians, simple-hearted and a bit sly at the same time. And the industrious Bulgarians. And the business-like Armenians. And the stately Greeks. The Italians paved Pushkinskaya Street, one of the most beautiful of them all, shaded by the plane trees and chestnut trees. They lived on it for a long time; it was called Italienskaya Street.

As the city evolved, Catherine the Great invited Jews from all over the Pale of Settlement, where they were prescribed to live, to come over. She wanted them to help in trading grain to European countries. Jews flocked to Odessa en masse; they found their lives here a far cry from the stifling atmosphere of the shtetls where they used to live. It's hardly surprising that soon over a third of Odessans were Jews.

However, while enjoying life in this free-spirited city, they still had to be on guard against any knock on the door. And for a good reason. Time and again the knocks came not from a well-wishing neighbor who came over to borrow a pinch of salt for his soup: Jewish pogroms took place in 1821, 1859, 1871, 1881, and 1905.

Eventually, Odessan Jews had enough. To escape the scourge of the tsar, they took to the city port, boarded ships, and headed overseas. Blessed and prosperous became the nations into which these people poured in an endless stream of close kin. Had they landed above the Arctic Circle, their hearts, beating passionately, thirsting to live their lives to the fullest, would have made the icebergs melt. Wherever they settled, skyscrapers popped up, bridgework steel rattled from rivet guns, the decks of pleasure steamers filled up, and newborn babies appeared, one after another. As soon as those babies could pierce a meatball with a fork, they were handed a violin. Bash it out! Give us what you have! Reach for the stars! The Odessan genes gave America George Gershwin, Bob Dylan, and Steven Spielberg—to name a few . . .

Back then, not all Jews left Odessa. There were those who stayed, unable to tear themselves from the wondrous city. Though one could find grumblers among them, there was not a single whiner. Odessans have always known there are only two reasons for whining: bad weather and poor digestion. It is St. Petersburg where the gloomy breed. What do you expect from people living in a swamp? It is Moscow where sad faces abound. What other faces can people have who don't eat home-cooked broth from a freshly killed chicken, but feed themselves instead at the state-run eateries with pastries stuffed with the entrails of over-aged animals!

It's not surprising that, born in such a vibrant city, having absorbed its free spirit, and imbued with its inhabitants' vigor and cheerfulness, the great Russian Jewish writer, Isaac Babel, celebrated it in his *Odessa Tales*. It is only natural that from this bustling city Leonid Utyosov, the country's first jazzman, ascended to the all-Union glory. The mocking mode of the Odessa spirit, the propensity of Odessans to irony, inspired the best pages

of the famous comedic novels the whole country read decades on end—Ilf and Petrov's *The Twelve Chairs* and *The Golden Calf*. On these streets, in the verbal duel between its citizens, the most side-splitting underground jokes took their shape and spread all over the vast country.

Several decades passed, and the time came to flee again from the new scourge called "Soviet power." There was nothing in the world worse than that power, or more repugnant to the free-spirited Odessans. Soviet life was a life filled with countless regulations, endless killjoy Party directives and warning signs of the No-Lying-on-the-Grass type. All this drove the Odessans nuts. What else is grass for, for God's sake, if not for lying on? That power, with its ubiquitous railway-type warnings—No Right Turn, No Left Turn—made their mouths taste like soot. Some demonic power dragged Odessans through a locomotive tunnel, filling their chests with the foul smell of burning fuel.

The day came when the Odessans said to themselves, "Enough! We love to live, and we want to live. Otherwise, we wouldn't have settled by the warm sea, at the edge of vast steppes with millennium-old wormwood overgrowing in the ravines. And the warm sea winds wouldn't wander all over our city like a giggling woman who had sipped young Moldovan wine and picked up a passerby by the armpits and dragged him along the city's streets, straight as a ship's masts."

That such a buoyant city had been part of such a cheerless country as the Soviet Union was a historical anomaly. From time to time, the state had paid for it through overturned police cars, cholera epidemics, and audacious comedy writers who couldn't be straightened out. People read their books in secret: youngsters under their school desks; white-collar city employees during their lunch breaks; train operators through dangerous transits, when they should have been looking at the signals, not in a book.

There is no such thing as a former Odessan. The place is forever in the veins of every person born and raised in that blessed city.

