Jewish Odessa

Jews and Odessa



Only 3% of Odessa's one million population are Jewish. Approximately 30 thousand Jews live in Odessa today. Despite this remaining small fraction of Odessa's once thriving Jewish population this city continues to be considered a Jewish city.

In 1916, the famous writer Isaac Babel described Odessa as "the city made by Jews". In an attempt to understand Babel's words of wisdom, one should not treat his writings as mere slogans but rather try to interpret their meaning.

Odessa was built on the order of the Russian Empress Catherine the Great. The city was founded by a half Spanish and half Irish de Ribas, and planned by a Dutch engineer de Volan. The first architect of Odessa was an Englishman incidentally called Firster.

The first Odessa settlers had special privileges and indulgences, which the Russian Empire, at the time, could afford.

It is hard to imagine today how many restrictions and regulations were imposed upon the life of every Jew in the Russian Empire. But, the young Odessa was heaven on earth for its Jewish settlers. On the territory of Odessa Jews received almost equal rights to other citizens of the city.



Is it, then, surprising that one hundred years after the birth of Odessa one third of its population was Jewish?

In Babel's words, this city became "The Star of Exile." Yes, Odessa was "The Star of Exile", the star of dispersion and it became, "The Gate of Zion".

Here they were able to participate in world civilization on a greater scale. In the process of leaving their small life in the *shtettels*, Jews were not only becoming citizens of Odessa, they were moving up in life styles, high enough for a start to move to Jerusalem.

The formula of success was quite simple at the time. A Jewish young man having arrived in Odessa having received his education in one of the city's leading institutions, having learnt Russian plus two or three European languages and

having acquired a profession felt himself a rightful citizen of society. Odessa had Jewish bankers, engineers, professors, doctors, musicians, architects, property landlords, owners of restaurants, coffee shops and others. But, sooner or later, there came a time for that "But" when this civilized, well-off Jew was made to realize – you are an unwanted stranger here! Get out of our city! Usually this was done in a simple and cruel form – pogrom. Notwithstanding his financial and social status, his reputation and respect even in the highest ranks of society no Jew could protect his belongings and savings from robbery or his family from abuse and even murder. It was exactly then that the Star of Exile turned into the Gate of Zion.



In Odessa, you can find something Jewish anywhere. In every corner of historical Odessa, one can find a piece of ancient and modern Jewish history; including the most distinguished parts of the city.

While strolling along the Primorsky (Seaside) Boulevard, it is worth looking under your feet. On one of the hatches to the underground communication you'll find a clearly engraved name "Trud". This hatch cover was produced by the Society of Jewish Craftsmen which was founded in 1864 during the tenure of Odessa's Rabbi Schwabacher. Besides teaching craftsmanship to Jewish children and youths, the society also operated as a manufacturer of technical and artistic goods. One of the artistic creations of "Trud", the iron bowls decorating the most cherished memorial to poet Alexander Pushkin, you can still find today at the beginning of the Boulevard.

Just walk down the street looking at some of Odessa's famous addresses. Havkin who saved India from plaque and cholera lived here. It is here that the famous violinist D. Oistrakh produced the first sounds of music, which later reached the rest of the world. Here you will also find the address of the great poet and warrior Vladimir Jabotinsky, the infamously talented Hebrew poet Chaim Bialik, the world known Jewish historian Semion Dubnov, the mathematician Mark Krein, the politician and first mayor of Tel- Aviv, Meir Dizengoff, the father of spiritual Zionism Ahad ha-Am, the creator of the first highly acclaimed Yiddish literature Mendele Mocher-Sforim. Together with other Jews – bankers, lawyers, artists, poets, writers and even street venders – they breathed life into this city,



inspired it and in that sense created its aura.

By the way, tombstones — archeological findings on the old Jewish cemetery confirm that Jews lived in these places long before Odessa was born. Well, as it turns out – Jews have always been here.

However, not everyone who left Odessa did so voluntarily. Until 1941 almost half of Odessa's population was Jewish. Over one hundred thousand Jews died during the Nazi occupation (exact numbers are not known). Many did not come back from WW II, others did not come back from evacuation. Stalin's rule further demolished the

Jewish Diaspora in placing some restrictions on who could return and on what conditions.

Thousands of Jews left in the1970s and thousands left in the1990s.



-Where have you been outside of Kiev? – a young man from Kyiv asks a Polish student writing about Babel.

-Odessa, – she answers

-But it's a city of Kikes! What were you doing there?!- the young leader of democracy bursts out indignantly.

As they say, first you work on your reputation and then it starts to work on you. These 3% of the city's population continue to give Odessa its Jewish flavor.

Modern Jewish Community

1989 Jewish life in Odessa started to revive: Odessa at last had a Rabbi, Ishaya Gisser, and an operating organization called "Jewish Culture Society". During the Soviet era, Odessa had only one operating synagogue. Ishaya Gisser was the first Rabbi of this synagogue and an organizer of the "Shomrey Shabos" community. From the



moment of its establishment the Shomrey Shabos community and the Jewish Culture Societ started their charity to assist the elderly Jewish population.

1990 The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (AJJDC) and JAFI Sokhnut started to operate in Odessa

1991 The Jewish Culture Society was given the building of the former butcher's synagogue. It was the first building i the Soviet Union handed over under restitution, and the only case of a building given to a non-religious community. The building initially housed the Jewish Culture Society and the Odessa Jewish Musical Theatre "Migdal-Or" expanding their facilities in 1992 to include the educational and aesthetic centre "Migdal" (now — Migdal International Centre of Jewish Community Programs), Israeli Cultural Centre, and the Association of Ghetto Survivors.

1992 After the collapse of the old synagogue on Lesnaya Street, a new "Shomrey Shabos" synagogue (the former tailors' synagogue, used in the Soviet time as a warehouse) re-opened.

1994 Rabbi Shlomo Baksht came to Odessa and founded another religious community — Or Sameah.

The Tali school opened, today it is a state-owned Public School № 94 where Hebrew language and Jewish disciplines are taught.

The Or Sameah community opened a private Jewish school.

The Jewish Library (located at 5, Pionerskaya Street) started to operate, on the basis of it The Community House o Jewish Knowledge "Moria" opened in 1997.



1996 A Jewish Charity Centre "Gmilus Hesed"was established. Today this centre assists more than 8000 elderly people.

1997 The Or Sameah community received the building of the former Choral Synagogue.

1998 Rabbi Ishaya Gisser was succeeded by Rabbi Avroom Wolf, and the community receives its name Chabad Shomrey Shabos.

1999 The youth organization Hillel established in Odessa

The Chabad community opens a private Jewish school. Later, both of the communities opened a chain of educationa facilities and other institutions. As a result, today Odessa has two large Orthodox communities with synagogues, mikvas, services of the "Hevra Kadish", developed educational structure.

2006 The Shaarey Zion Foundation established.

Migdal International Centre of Jewish Community Programs unites Jews of all ages (on the bas



is of the law of return) children from all Jewish and non-Jewish schools, young people from Jewish and non-Jewish higher education institutions, both religious and non-religious, middle-aged and toddlers (fror their birth). Today Migdal operates over one hundred programmes in various spheres of Jewish life:

- Jewish education and enlightenment,
- Association of artistic groups (dance, vocal, music, theatre),
- Athletic programmes (shaping, chess, dancing),
- Souvenir Gallery – showroom of Jewish painting and decorative art,
- "Migdal" publishing house (monthly journal "Migdal-Times", methodological materials, scientific, artistic and historical literature)
- Virtual Jewish community – **www.migdal.ru** ,

- Library with a collection of over ten thousand books, active educational programmes and an information centre,
- Odessa Jewish Musical Theatre "Migdal-or" (Klesmer, Israeli and Yiddish programs, authors' original dances, live music performances, colourful costumes and decorations); the theatre is a prize-winner of many international competitions and festivals and was recently awarded a certificate for the development of Jewish culture and traditions from the State of Maryland (USA).
- The Jewish Student Club and the Jewish Family Club — active volunteers of the Migdal Centre,
- Centre for Jewish Children and Families at Risk "Beytenu"
- Early Development Centre "Migdal Mazl Tov" — for families with children from birth to 6 years old and for pregnant women, 
- The Jewish Museum "Migdal Shorashim" — a museum of history of Odessa Jews (various museum clubs, as well as the Holocaust centre "Zakhor").

The Migdal Centre runs seminars, master classes, festivals, scientific conferences youth trainings, seminars, workshops, and family and children camps. The centre's performing arts groups are continuously active in touring and winning various awards for their performance.

The activity of the Migdal Center is diverse and dynamic including ongoing collaboration with many Jewish and non-Jewish organizations of Odessa, Ukraine and other countries around the world.

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