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Jarrod Tanny. *City of Rogues and Schnorrers: Russia's Jews and the Myth of Old Odessa.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011. xiii + 265 pp. $80.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-253-35646-8.

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Commissioned by Jason Kalman (Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion)

This is a fun-filled book. Its contents span the short, but intensive history of Jewish humor in Odessa. You know Odessa, that Greek, Russian, Ukrainian, and Jewish city on the Black Sea closer geographically and temperamentally to Athens than to Moscow. Jews there made one of their proverbial home-away-from-homes, embodying the spirit of the city: irreverence, innovation, theatricality, false elegance, and wit. The Jewish joke ultimately came to sum up the city's character, so it is not surprising that we now have a book devoted to a study of the images of Odessa and Odessa's Jews through the genre of the Jewish joke. Below are a few for your enjoyment:

"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?" (p. 48).

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"I want cup of coffee!"
"With any milk or without some milk?"
"Without nobody!" (p. 72).

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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" (p. 150).

* * *

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 zany, esst mir nit op di harts, mayn vayb hot mir shoyn genug gezidlt darfar)" (p. 66).

The material is great, no question about it. However, I had trouble discerning Jarrod Tanny's main argument. If I had to formulate it, I would say it is this: in Soviet times Jewish identity morphed into legends and stories that gave voice to Jewish presence but located this presence far from reality. Thus, instead of real Jews--clerks, intellectuals, journalists, teachers, and so on--Jews were identified with gangsters, thieves, and colorful rogues. The salty flavor of Odessa's sun-bleached beaches proliferated through Soviet humor. However, in time this humor became anchored less and less in reality and became itself a source for infinite play of a social world characterized by freedom, individuality, and personal pleasure--the antithesis of state-controlled Soviet life. The Jews of Odessa became a myth, as did Odessa itself.

Chronologically the book starts at the time when Odessa's Jews entered Russian literary life. The language debates that plagued Jewish communities in the North (Yiddish-Hebrew-Polish-Russian) left this city untouched. It was a model of russification, and Osip Rabinovich, the editor of *Rassvet*, the first Jewish journal in Russian, aimed to "enlighten" the growing numbers of Jews who were adopting the state language and joining Russian culture.

This is certainly a book about Jewish russification, and therefore it is not coincidental that it originated as a dissertation written under Yuri Slezkine. It is another expression of Slezkine's thesis that Jews in Russia/USSR ran to Russian as moths to fire. In Slezkine's *The Jewish Century* (2006), the passport to Russia occurred through the verses of Alexander Pushkin, while here Tanny identifies russification through the images of Odessa's wheeler-dealers.

It is not surprising that Odessa's community comes to represent the Jews of the Soviet Union because it is exactly Odessa that characterizes yearnings for freedom and play. Just as Mikhail Krutikov was acute when noticing the origins of the future Jewish commissars in the militaristic maskilim of the 1870s, in a similar way Tanny implicitly sees the heroes of Isaac Babel's stories as models for Soviet Jews. In the latter case, the link is less direct because the projection lies exclusively in the realm of the imagination. But dreams and yearnings are real. Certainly Soviet Jewish engineers, doctors, and teachers did not dream of midnight heists and shoot-outs, but they did yearn for a sense of freedom and self-determination that is central to the Babel oeuvre. Odessa (or what is represented by Odessa), and not stolid Moscow or bureaucratic Petersburg, produced the yearnings that helped break apart the great Soviet Empire.

But jokes go deeper than just politics. They project ambivalences within the individual of the conflict between shtetl and the city, Jew and Soviet, the son of a yiddishe mama and the man who had left all that behind. And the jokes are funny on at least two levels: for the non-Jews who laugh at the deformation (a Jew, half in that world and half in the new one), and for Jews themselves who still possess these traits, but who now feel distanced from them. Funny can be caused by or mean very different things for different people in different places.

However, for these arguments to give me full satisfaction, I would have liked some theoretical discussion of the function of humor in Russian/Soviet society generally. At times I even had trouble figuring out who was providing the humor and who was the intended audience (when and where such jokes were told). It turned out often enough that the joke-teller was the Soviet comedian Mikhail Zhvanetskii.

Additionally, I am curious about why at this moment Odessa and the problem of cultural

memory is coming into vogue as a research topic. Such scholars as Charles King, Joachim Schlör, and now Tanny stand at the front of this trend. There is a study group at the University of Bochum in Germany devoted to the study of Odessa. Is it connected with cosmopolitanism, port cities, or multiethnic metropolises--subjects that seem on the cutting edge of studies in architecture, city planning, cultural studies, and philosophy? What does this say about Ukraine, the periphery, and the south (as opposed to the north) of Russia? What axis does Odessa stand on today; is it east-west or north-south or does it just radiate concentric circles around itself? Should it be joined to lists of "free" cities that are within the empire but seem apart, or should we connect it with outlying military posts that become developed, or boom cities? I, for one, would have liked some explication here.

The big plus of the volume is the presentation and analysis of a large number of texts that deal with Jews in Odessa. The list contains writings in four languages over more than a century; admittedly the author treats primarily those in Russian. Thematically the myth holds close to the Babel images: the Jew as city benefactor and mafioso, womanizer and paterfamilias, intellectual and anti-intellectual, old wise man and young smart-aleck. Jewish men are more prominent in the selection of material than Jewish women. I can honestly say this is a book that a nonscholar can appreciate. The author traces Odessa's politics and fortunes through the joke. You will not stop laughing even if you have never heard of Odessa.

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