In the Shadow of Benya Krik: Jews and the Street in 1920s Odessa
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[NB: extremely rough draft – not for citation or quotation without permission]

There amidst the somber mass of things,
An obscure people lives and dies in silence
Millions of beings in thrall to a fatal instinct,
Seeking gold by avenues devious and straight.
-- Auguste Barbier, “London” (1837)

I begin with an apology, a disclaimer of sorts, which is also a plea. This is the first paper to emerge from the early stages of research on a new project, and it is still under-researched, undertheorized, and roughly crafted. Hence my desire and need for your critical feedback. The project is tentatively titled “The Crooked and the Straight in Urban Public Life: Odessa, Bombay, and New York Between the Wars.” The “crooked” in the title is partly an echo of Immanuel Kant’s line that “out of the crooked timber of humanity, no straight thing was ever made” (a phrase used regularly by Isaiah Berlin to critique the hubris of communists) but also a reference to deviance, indiscipline, and disorientations of all kinds, including diverse expressions of queerness. “The straight” speaks of efforts to discipline, usually in the name of “culture” and progress and right moral order, the “crooked timber of humanity”: the men and women (but mostly men) who policed and promoted moral and social normativities, including states, police, judges, moral reformers, religious activists, nationalists, and communists.

Chronologically, this project concerns a time of indulgence and transgression along with intensifying policing, campaigns for moral reform, and struggles to impose modern, hygienic, and moral civilizations by seemingly quite different political regimes in communist Odessa, colonial Bombay, and capitalist New York—cities that also all shared a vital and dangerous “cosmopolitanism” typical of port cities. Spatially, this project is oriented toward the “street,” including “street” life, manners, values, and language, but also (for these spaces were often seen as imbued with and shaping “the street”) sites of public leisure, sociability, and entertainment; “underground” urban worlds (“dens”—or in the local Odessa slang, “maliny” [literally raspberries, for it was said that these were “sweet”]) of prostitution, narcotics, gambling, illicit distilling and drinking, and criminal association); clubs and organizations that promoted a more
orderly and “cultured” way of life; and spaces of public memory and forgetting, such as cemeteries, monuments, historical commemorations, and renaming of public spaces.

Jews, especially in Odessa and New York, entwined themselves into these places and stories. In the 1920s and 1930s, especially, Jews often had little choice (which is not to say that many did not find pleasure in this role) but to occupy a “queer” orientation to the norm, if I might borrow and somewhat misuse Sara Ahmed’s argument about non-straight-line “orientations” toward spaces, objects, and time (and, thus, toward the self), orientations experienced as discomfort, deviance, and “disorientation,” but also that point toward and enact different possibilities for living. The paradoxical transgressiveness practiced by street Jews in these times and places of discipline and deviance is a story both tragic and redemptive. And often significantly funny.

Odessa, of course, is a city famous for its Jewish street stories and its transgressive Jewish storytelling and mockery of norms. It has been said that in this port city in the south of the Russian empire and the Soviet Union, cosmopolitan Jewish “modernity,” often of a particularly plebian sort, was fashioned and displayed as nowhere else in Russia. Odessa, John Klier famously wrote, was “a kind of anti-shtetl.” Among Odessa’s Jewish storytellers, none equaled Isaac Babel. And in Babel’s Odessa Stories (Odesskie rasskazy) no character is the equal of Benya Krik. The loose prototype for Krik was the real Odessa gangster Moishe-Iakov Vinnitsky, whose nickname (a ubiquitous practice in the criminal world) was Mishka Yaponchik (commenting on his “Japanese” eyes), a tough Odessa street hoodlum with anarchist sympathies who aided the Bolsheviks during the civil war and was shot by the Whites in 1919. Benya Krik was certain type Jew, strongly connected to a mythic Odessan spirit, which Babel envisioned as a source of salvation: a southern spirit of “sun-drenched steppes washed by the sea,” which can “freshen the blood,” and from which a new “Messiah” will come, or at least a “literary Messiah, for which we have waited so long and fruitlessly, will arrive from there.”

As a sign, the Odessan Jewish “king” of the street, Benya Krik, wore cream-colored pants, a chocolate jacket, and raspberry [yes!] boots. Proud and unafraid, he was an audacious man of the world who laughed at the injuries of diaspora and empire—though he fully acknowledged them, openly declaring that God had made “a mistake when he settled the Jews in Russia so they could be tormented as if they were in hell.” But he was determined to fight, laugh, play, and win, not to mourn. As one of Babel’s characters famously said of Benya Krik, in the
1923 story “How it was Done in Odessa,” explaining (while sitting on the wall overlooking the Jewish cemetery), how Benya became “King”:

Forget for a time that you have glasses on your nose and autumn in your heart. Forget that you start fights from behind your writing desk and stutter when you are among people. Imagine for a moment that you fight in public squares and stutter only on paper. You are a tiger, a lion, a cat. You can spend the night with a Russian woman, and the Russian woman will be satisfied. You are twenty-five years old. If the sky and the earth had rings attached to them, you would grab these rings and pull the sky down to earth. And your papa is the carter Mendel Krik…. You want to live, but he makes you die twenty times a day.  

As scholars have observed, the bespectacled Jew with autumn in his heart was the emasculated Jew of imperial Russia (and Europe), the shtetl Jew. Krik was the mythic embodiment of virility and fighting back, a “king” who was an answer to tsar and father (and perhaps an answer to the Christian “King of the Jews” as well). Temporally, many have argued, this was a story of the prerevolutionary “past” that offered transgressive and thus redemptive possibilities for the present and the future.  

There is another, concretely historical, way that Benya Krik and his prerevolutionary urban world spoke of the post-revolutionary present in which it was written. The daily reports from the streets by newspaper journalists and the police were filled with stories of Jewish transgression on a persistently unruly street—but also of Jewish judges, communists, and Komsomoltsy (members of the Young Communist League) who were determined to build a new and straight civilization. For them, it was straightness and normative order not transgression that would save the world, including its still marginalized Jews.  

The Odessa regional archive, which contains the Odessa police and court papers, is an interesting place, not without its own haunting stories of history, violence, and loss—of deviance and discipline, of writing and rewriting the past and the future. The archive is in the former Brodsky Synagogue, whose famous choir and cantors Benya Krik ordered to sing at the funeral of a Jewish shop assistant, Iosif Muginshtein, killed during a raid by Krik’s gang of the firm of Rubin Tartakovsky, known as “Yid-and-a-half” because he was so rich and had so much chutzpah. In 1924, the synagogue was closed and its space given to the Rosa Luxemburg Workers’ Club, especially for Jewish workers. (I asked about records for this club while working
there, but no one could figure out where these were—another haunting silence). During World War II, the Romanian occupiers of the city moved the regional archive into the building—for they hated both communists and Jews, so this may have worked as a double insult. In 2016, the building, which is on the verge of collapse, held up by storage shelves on the inside and vine-covered wooden buttresses on the outside (I ate my lunch last summer under the shade of these buttresses), was purchased by the Lubavicher Hasidim, who plan to establish a Chabad synagogue there.

On a still more uncanny note, I found myself haunted in the archive by my own family names—though my family have no Odessa roots, though the archivist assumed I was searching for my roots like many other Jews who do archival research in Odessa (or, more often, hire people for this). I found myself drawn to police reports about Steinbergs (Shteinberg in Russian), and there were many. I felt a strange sympathy, for instance, for a woman named Steinberg (the summary police reports that remain often listed only family names and gender) in the summer of 1923 (Babel’s “How It Was Done in Odessa” first appeared in an Odessa journal in May 1923), whose apartment, located across from the main public market (the Privoz, in a rough neighborhood close to the Moldavanka, the center of action in Babel’s “Odessa Stories”), was searched by the police, where they found a few bottles of bootlegged liquor. But they could not arrest her because, the police reported, “citizenness Steinberg disappeared.” But I was also sympathetic to “Comrade Steinberg,” a judge who regularly presided over show-trials held in factories and clubs as part of the growing state struggle “with hooliganism and debauchery” (khuligantsvom i deboishirstvom—words that embraced a multitude of transgressions including street fighting, public disorder, drunkenness, absenteeism from work, and general disorder and transgression [beschinstvo, another embracive term]). I was also drawn to people who had my maternal grandmother’s name, Rabinovich (as many did, of course). For example, also in 1923, a certain Feige Rabinovich (Feige happens to be the name of my grandmother’s mother) was robbed of her overcoat (shadows of Gogol!) at high noon at the corner of Karangozov (now Lev Tolstoy) and Novoskelskaia streets at the edge of the Moldavanka. In 1924, a woman named Rabinovich was on “fraud” (moshennichestvo—with no additional details) together with a woman named Steinberg. (To add a coda to these encounters, my paternal grandfather, Samuel Steinberg, was a junkman in Los Angeles in the 1920s who delivered illegal booze under the metals he collected in his horse and cart. I imagine he might have quite at home in Odessa).
I have no idea what larger meaning there might be in these stories beyond my own feelings of uncanny but completely fictive connection. But one historical observation can be made: there were so many women in these stories. Indeed, the archive is full of Jewish women working as thieves, fences, moonshiners, bootleggers, brothel keepers, and prostitutes. And many women bosses, as will be seen, in charge of operations (as in a Talmud-Torah-moonshine operation I will consider later—which I mention as foreshadowing to keep you reading) and often hosting in their apartments “dens of debauchery” (*pritony razvrata*, as police and papers often called these, or *maliny* in the local slang). Benya Krik’s mythic world—that of the 1920s reimaging the 1910s for the 1920s—is a man’s world. Women there mainly appear as wives, sisters, and daughters, as when Benya himself decides to marry after he sees Zilya during a robbery of Eichbaum’s home and farm. In return for taking Eichbaum’s daughter—part of Benya’s loot, as it were—Krik arranged that Eichbaum be named an elder of the Brodsky Synagogue. Unlike in the actual world reported in the archive, women were not independent actors in Benya’s world.

Of course, Benya Krik’s fictional gang were *naletchiki*—raiders who undertook armed robberies of businesses and the homes of the rich. And in reality, too, this was a man’s profession. Guns were the power tools of men and masculinity. Police and the newspapers often dubbed these *naletchiki* *bandity*, a term that also implied anti-Soviet politics (though Bolsheviks were also called bandity by their enemies) and politics was also a masculinized space. Odessa newspapers in the early 1920s regular reported armed gang raids (nalety) on homes and businesses (and also against peasants in the nearby countryside). Like Benya Krik’s gang, the Jewish gangs were often based in the Moldavanka, a working-class neighborhood known for its gangsters and its large population of poor Jews, working mostly as craftsmen, carters, clerks, and crooks. These were violent assaults when anyone resisted or was in the way—and the victims were evidently not honored the way Krik often honored Tartakovsky’s unfortunate shop assistant, because he was a poor working man who was simply in the way. When the police tried to root these gangs out of their “nests,” there were shoot-outs—and, in the early 1920s the police usually lost. One example: In February 1923, detectives raided the apartment of a certain Liberman. As soon as the officers entered the building’s courtyard (a typical set up in the Moldavanka, where buildings were often connected through a series of interior courtyards), a sentry warned of their arrival, leading to a sustained fifteen-minute shoot-out. Before the police
could capture anyone, the report concluded, “the bandits, numbering ten individuals, disappeared into the darkness of night.”

It was said of Benya Krik that “the police end where Benya begins.”

In the real streets, too, the crooked more fully mastered its spaces and where embraced by its dark corners.

In time, of course, the Benyas of Odessa ended where the police began: the forces of Soviet discipline and order gained the upper hand over the streets and these gangs and in doing so ended the spatial distinctiveness of Moldavanka, its multiple forms of crookedness, both real and romanticized, in the face of a homogenizing, straightening, and solemn state project. This may have shaped Babel’s slightly nostalgic recreation. For surely something was lost, as well as gained, in this victory of normativizing state power.

Moldavanka and its streets are at the heart of these Jewish stories. In May 1923 (the precise month that “How It Was Done in Odessa” was published for the first time), the Odessa Evening News (Vecherniaia izvestiia) published a set of articles about the Moldavanka and its streets, already recognized as fading into a world of legend. War, revolution, and occupation (from 1917 to 1920 the city was occupied by forces of the Ukrainian Central Rada, the French Army, the Red Army, the White Army, and the Bolsheviks again) had transformed the lives of people in the city. During the civil war, the city suffered from famine and epidemics. Still in 1923, more than a third of Moldavanka’s buildings were listed as “uninhabitable.” But this was not the only sense of loss. What is the most Moldavankan street in Moldavanka, a reporter asked: it is Glukhaia Street (from a word that means deaf, out-of-the way, a backwater, voiceless, forsaken). “For here lived the kings of Moldavanka.” When those kings of crime reigned, the street was hardly glukhaia, the journalist reminded readers. On the contrary, it was “always intoxicatingly noisy” (vsegda p’iano krikliivaia—with the term for noisy, which could also be translated as clamorous, shouting, vociferous, the adjectival form of krik). “The key to life was to be drunk and debauched, day and night. But today it deserves its name. It has truly become a glukhaia street, dying and already dead. Houses are ruins…. And the most glukskoe place today is where songs, shouts, and tears, and the clash of the knives of bandit and lovers, never died down.”

Another essay on the hay market square in Moldavanka, known as “Kosarka” in local slang, described this as a distinctly “crowded, noisy, and joyous,” place “before the revolution,” where workers gathered to be selected for construction jobs, where carters dragged goods about
all day long, and where “the profanity was as heavy as leaden clouds carried through thick air saturated with the smell of bad food. But now you would not recognize the place. The Revolution has ventilated it with its refreshing spirit.” Now there is a proper labor bureau, work is regulated, and during free time workers go to their clubs and libraries rather than to unhealthy “corners,” which are “dying out.” Or in the final stanza of a poem titled “Moldavanka” that accompanied these essays,

Налета, злые зубы / Gang raids and fierce teeth
Губрозыск сбитъ помог / The criminal investigation division comes to the rescue
И выростают клубы / and clubs blossom
На месте синагог. / in the place of synagogues.

Even the songs they once sang in the Moldavanka have changed, we are told. In the old days, “in the evening when the lights of the taverns and wine cellars flicker beneath their awnings,” the streets were filled with songs like this:

Две пары портянок / Two pairs of foot wrappings
И пара котов / And a pair of felt boots
Кандалы готовы / The shackles are ready
И в Сибирь готов / And to Siberia I am ready.”

But now, instead of taverns there are workers’ clubs. “In the evenings the streets are alive with the conversations of the young” about school, lectures, clubs, and the theater. And they sing songs about Trotsky, Lenin, and foreign affairs. Here is one:

Троцкий храбрый воевал / Trotsky fought bravely
Чумчара—гумчара / Chumchara—gumchara
Миру [к]укиш показал / He gave the world the finger
Ку-ку! / Ku-ku!
Ленин много он успел / Lenin accomplished a lot
Чумчара—гумчара
Всех буржуев одолел / He beat all the bourgeois
Ку-ку! / Ku-ku!

And then there is the moral of the story—its final line: “The Moldavanka of former years will not be resurrected, for the spirit of the Moldavanka is that of modernity and labor, without baruchs, maliny, and taverns.”
Two years later, in 1925, more or less than same message of change was repeated in an article in the same paper about how “the Moldavanka is not what it once was.” Back in the day, the reporter recalled, “every building was a fortress, with guys going about like wolves, distinguished only by the fact that some carried Nogan pistols and others carried Mausers.” But now there are clubs, theaters, lectures—the hallmarks of Soviet cultural revolution. In 1929, too, a reporter declared the “old Moldavanka” to be dead and forgotten. “Babel’s heroes— raiders, crooks, speculators, and other such ‘miserable types’ [налетчики, масурики, лапетутники и прочая «мелкота»]—have been pushed out somewhere into the margins, have disappeared along with glorifying the ‘lower-depths.’” Only a few old folks even remember those days, like one of the “‘last of the Mohicans,’ a now gray-haired former Moldavanka apache [hooligan] who reminds others in his circle, ‘Ekh, those were the days. I remember as if it were now how we organized a big brawl on Hospital Street.’” Now there is the “new Soviet Moldavanka.” Now people gather on the streets to chat not to fight; “on the streets everyone is happy and noisy” (на улице весело и шумно); the neighborhood is full of workers’ clubs, cinemas (both only showing educational films), and libraries; in the main square of the neighborhood, children play and adults dance to live music. Only one small problem remained, the reporter admitted: men continued to get drunk, though now at the State Liquor Bar (бар пищетреста).

As this repeated story of loss and progress might suggest, the eradication of the old brawling, thieving, drinking, noisy, and boasting Moldavanka—and a certain image of Odessa, and perhaps political message, for which it stood—was a long-fought battle through most of the 1920s. That the old Moldavanka did not “disappear” is evident from police reports and even the newspapers themselves. Classified informational bulletins produced regularly by the criminal investigation department of the Odessa city police in 1925, for example, catalogued by type the huge range of criminals active on the streets, as if these were professional specializations or identities (which they often were): “armed thieves, apartment robbers, con-artists (farmazonschiki)…, moonshiners (samogonschiki), safe-crackers (mekhaniki), thieves who enter by tunnels or other openings (kaburshchiki), suspicious and unreliable elements, break-in thieves (vory-vzlomshchiki)… money-lenders (rostovshchiki), fences (kaina),” and many more, often using slang terms used from criminal circles. They also regularly listed criminals’ nicknames, which often highlighted their Jewish identities—such as Moshko the Yid (Мошко...
Жид), Sasha the Yid, Isaiah the Yid, Feiga Di Roita, or Mishigener—though most nicknames emphasized physical or other personal characteristics (such as Gold-Tooth or Hunchback), or previous (or parallel) professions (Barber or Modistka [working in women’s fashion]), or their criminal specialty (Mit’ka the Counterfeiter or Sonya Golden-Hand—a name adopted in memory of the legendary nineteenth-century thief and con-artist Sofia Bliuvshtein), experience in prison (such as Seven-Years), and native town (Der Varshaver, Bukharin).

Related to names and language, it is worth noting the unmarked Jewishness of much Odessa crime. Until the late 1920s (a change that is surely significant), neither the police nor newspapers thought it necessary or useful to mention the ethnicity of a crook. Perhaps Jews and Jewish crime were so much part of the everyday life of this cosmopolitan port city that its Jewishness did not require special comment. On the other hand, since many Jews were marked by their family names (though these could be ambiguous) and especially by their nicknames (not only in self-identifying as a “Yid,” but also in using Yiddish to construct nicknames), so perhaps no more needed to be said. Still, it is worth noting absence of the word “Jew” in reporting crime in the early 1920s, even in secret police reports.

In my own research and in the rest of this paper, I admit, I am doing here what Odessans likely did: identifying Jews by name. This is a risky terrain, of course, which a number of scholars, including Eugene Avrutin, have written about. The problem is not only that mistakes can be made, but also that this reproduces a identifying practice that had more than a whiff of anti-Semitism. [But as this is a new terrain for me, I need to think more about its implications.]

But back to the archive and to the considerable evidence that Jews were ubiquitous in the transgressive crookedness that so marked Odessan life—and not just obvious criminal acts like theft, but across the spectrum of “hooliganism and debauchery” (khuligantsvo i deboshirstvo), of disorder and transgression (beschinstvo), that the Soviet state, embodied in people like Comrade Steinberg the Communist judge, many young Communist Youth League activists, or Jewish members of the Rosa Luxemburg Workers’ Club, were fighting to replace with a new social and normative order. Our knowledge of all this crookedness exists precisely because the forces of straightness were so active and invasive.

Police reports are filled with stories about men and women with identifiable Jewish names involved in liquor sales, fencing stolen goods, prostitution, fortune telling, illegal
abortions, robbery, running gambling parlors, organizing drinking parties (with other indulgences), and even (my favorite) selling “contraband esrog” for Sukkot.  

Some examples:

In January 1923, police arrested Mordko Gol’dner on a street corner (the location of many militia posts) after he was stopped and frisked and found to be carrying stolen goods.

In June 1923, at the giant public outdoor market (the “Privoz”), located near the Moldavanka, Abram Gershovich Fligel’, a worker and a member of the Ukrainian Communist Party, informed the police that he witnessed a 13-year-old boy, later identified as Isaak Aronovich Mizikov, steal 13 rubles from a woman’s pocket.

In January 1924, at 11:00 p.m., in a raid much like the one described in “How It Was Done in Odessa,” a store at 31 Lassalle Street (formerly and again Deribasovskia, the main business street of the city) owned by Kaminer, Grinfel’d, and Moldavsky, was robbed by a gang that included (for they were later arrested) Gersh Birenbaum and Iosif Vaisman (known as “Little Ios’ka”), resulting in the killing of a salesclerk named David Baron and the wounding of a cleaning lady. Birenbaum admitted to the police that he had shot the clerk.

In February 1924, the newspapers reported the arrest of a well-known but hard to capture apartment thief Moishe Zil’berman, known as “Moishe Oks,” who specialized in robbing the apartments of police officers.

In March 1924, on the corner of Lassalle and Trotsky streets (at the heart of downtown Odessa), a “well-known thief-recidivist Abram Fleisher” grabbed a woman’s purse, though he was apprehended by a carter who noticed the crime and restrained him in a nearby public bathroom until the police arrived.

In April 1924, police raided a “den of debauchery and thieves” (priton razvrata i vorov) run by Feiga Kalmusis, known as “Feiga Di Roite.” During the raid, the police surprised a couple in the act, Izrael Fainboim and Ekaterina Babich (whose name suggests she was not Jewish).

In October 1924, Fania Rempel’, a seamstress who also sold pirozhki at the bazaar, was sentenced to four years in prison for running a brothel in a residential cooperative, with the knowledge of residents and even the leaders of the coop.

In January 1925, the police reported that the home of Usher Fainerman and his wife, located in the central business district, was a regular nighttime gathering place for “prostitutes and dark elements.” In the same building, police reported, were three apartments used by
“shnifery” (criminal slang for thieves, evidently from the Yiddish) in which Fainerman was also involved, organizing the robberies.30

Also in January 1925, police raided a “samogonaia ‘malina’”—an illegal speakeasy (alcohol sales, though legalized under Soviet power, remained in state control) run by a 35-year-old tailor named Shans Mendeleevich Pankin.31

The police identified a number of maliny or pritony (dens) in 1925: A “thieves den” (vorovskii priton), which was also a gathering place for prostitutes and a speakeasy, headed by a woman named Ibershtein. In one of the rare cases in which it was explicitly emphasized that someone was Jewish, the report noted the Ibershtein spoke Yiddish at home.32 Another female-headed “den of debauchery” was uncovered near the popular Lanzheron beach. Here, under the management of Beila lakovlevna Gartman, police found prostitutes in residence and all-night drinking parties. It was added that Beila spoke several foreign languages and often hosted foreigners—obviously a cosmopolitan, though the term had not quite yet become a Stalinist code-word for Jew.33 Another “thieves den” was run by Naum Meerson, known as “Niunchik” together with a 20-year-old man known as “Mishka the Yid”—every evening the “criminal element” gathers at their place to play cards and brag about their most recent crimes. Another “den” was run by a prostitute named Sura Khaimovich Genzel’.34 The apartment of the widow Sima Meerovna Rozenblit, whose nineteen-year-old son was a member of the Komsomol and whose eighteen-year-old daughter also lived in the apartment, was a gathering place for after-midnight debauchery. Patrons entered and left through a window on a side alley.35 In the summer of 1925, on Karl Marx Street, the registered (for previously in prison) thief and “farmazon” (often farmazonshchik, Odessa slang for a petty con-artist) Isaak Girsh-Borukhovich Magner, opened a barbershop that became a hub for criminals to gather.36

Somewhat different is the newspaper story, in May 1925, of a homeless Jewish boy (one of the few stories where Jewishness was mentioned explicitly), named Borya. An orphan of indeterminate age, but roughly ten-years-old, he had no memory of when he was born, though he recalled that his father drove a horse cab (an izvozchik). Like many children, he was likely orphaned during the era of war and revolution, though the causes of his state are not described. The street was had become the only life he knew. He dressed in rags, slept on park benches or in empty containers by the port, and begged spare change. He dreamt of school and becoming a Young Pioneer—or so the journalist tells us—but orphanages and schools and even hospitals
would not take him because he had a skin disease, causing him to lose all his hair, a condition he tried to hide under a large hat. The subtitle of this article is “Borya’s Secrets”—but the reporter notes, though generally offer a sympathetic story full of pathos and pity, that “street children are untrustworthy and do not always tell the truth.” On the street, secrets revealed might be lies, or at least revealing fictions.37

Notwithstanding the optimistic claims of many journalists and political leaders, the police and probably most of the public knew that the “old” world was difficult to uproot, especially in neighborhoods like the Moldavanka. A story from 1928 reminds us of its persistence but also that it could be a world unto itself, as well-organized and disciplined as Babel described the fictional and supposedly vanished world of Benya Krik. In 1928, the police reported a “thieves court” in Moldavanka, run in the style of communist comrades courts though also drawing on a long underworld tradition. To make a long story short, at a wedding party in the Moldavanka, Shika Fel’dman insulted a young woman, which caused Mendel’ Kuklianskii, who worked as a carter (perhaps this was his house and his daughter), to call Fel’dman into the courtyard where they argued. Mendel hit Shika in the head with a horse harness. Fel’dman demanded this insult be adjudicated by a community court, which was assembled at a nearby tavern. The judges were Moishe Ferdman (who presided), Itsko Nepomniashchii (who owned the tavern), and a certain Khilik, all locals and known criminals. At the “trial” (it was the investigating officer, presumably an undercover detective who witnessed this himself, who put scare quotes around the term), Fel’dman said he would forgive Kuklianskii under the condition that he shoot a police detective named Moskvich in revenge for the fact that when Moskvich was in the Cheka, he shot two of Fel’dman’s brothers. As part of the deal, Feld’man provided the pistol to be used. But after reflection and discussion with his family, Kuklianskii changed his mind refused to shoot the officer. The judges decided, therefore, that Kuklianskii should be shot instead! The initial plan to shoot him immediately outside the tavern was opposed by Nepomniashchii, the tavern keeper, who said this would create problems for him. So, Fel’dman dragged Kuklianskii to a nearby alley and shot him, wounding him but not killing him.38

I could go on with examples. Instead, I want to end with two longer stories of the street that were featured in the press at the time—both concerning contested urban space, in particular the unquestionably Jewish space of the synagogue, where the street, as it were, continually broke in and set up shop, and the new and old did battle.
The most sensational story, from 1924, concerned a “giant moonshine [samogon] factory” run by Khasia Shtengant (the head of the operation) and her husband Shmuel, within a synagogue that was formerly a Talmud-Torah and briefly a Red Army barracks, located on the edge of the Moldavanka, and in terrible condition. The women the police found praying in the women’s section during their raid claimed to know nothing about what went on in this (as the press took to calling it) “Moonshine Temple” (khramo-samogon). And they were sort of telling the truth, the reporter comments, but they were “praying to a different God, Bacchus, and perhaps also to Soviet cash.” Ten leaders of this factory were brought to trial later that year. The defendants all claimed they knew nothing and were innocent, that they were all there purely “by accident” or had gone to the synagogue to pray. When the judge asked why they were praying in such a run-down synagogue rather than the nicer Brodsky synagogue, they answered that “Brodsky is such a pure place. They don’t let in hooligan types [shpany].” Indeed, many of the Jews involved in this operation were among the poorest of the poor: beggars, carters at the port, manual laborers. Even the “tsaddik” of the synagogue, Katsenel’bogen, who was called as a witness, turned out to be completely illiterate—he explained that he inherited his position because his father and grandfather before him were rabbis. We don’t really know the motives and thoughts of the many hundreds of people who came to witness the unfolding of this scandalous case. But according the prosecutor, the crowds came to the trial for the most high-minded reasons and he told them so. “Present in this hall,” he declared at the start of his two-hour final summation, “are thousands of workers, every one of whom understands that behind the backs of these ten accused individuals stands still one more defendant: this synagogue, this ‘moonshine temple.’ But we will say no more about this, for the consciousness of the working class already long ago brought its charges against all temples and all religion.” Instead, he focused on the culprits, who were motivated, he declared, by greed and power: especially the leader of the gang, “Gold-Tooth Khasia,” who exploited the poor Jews who worked for her because they were “hungry and innocent,” and even duped her own witless husband into this business.39 (By the way, in the days when this story was unfolding in the press in March 1924, the papers reported that Isaac Babel read his most recent story (the report does not say which) at a celebration at the Central Party Club of the establishment of a “corner” (ugolka, like Red Corners and Lenin Corners) for “worker-peasant correspondents.”)
The second story brings us back to the Brodsky synagogue where my research unfolded, where the most “pure” Jews prayed, and where Benya Krik found a source of authority and influence but also of desired forgiveness and even redemption. In 1924 and 1925, in a narrative much highlighted by the press, the Brodsky synagogue was the space of a cultural war between the new and the old, between the straight path into the emancipated communist future and the crooked and devious ways that lingered in dark and musty corners. In March 1924, at roughly the same time as the case of the Moonshine Temple in the decrepit former Talmud-Torah, *The Evening News* featured a story titled “An Incident in a Synagogue.” The author began with the moral lesson: “Wherever churches and synagogues have still not yet been replaced by clubs or some other socially useful establishment, the police or detectives often discover a moonshine factory.” Now it was Purim and the congregation of the Brodsky synagogue was enjoying the sounds of its fine organ mixing with the singing of the cantor and an excellent choir. “The story was being read about treacherous Haman’s plots against the Jewish people. A story worth studying.” Suddenly the sounds of the organ were pierced by the shouts of a woman from the upper balcony: “I spit on you and your cheap synagogue [kopechniiu synagogu]. I have to sit in the back row because I am wearing a simple coat [tulup]. The first rows are set aside for ladies in hats, for bourgeois ladies. You and your synagogue can go to hell!” She was asked to calm down and be respectful and told that the issue was not just her coat but her uncovered head. “This poor and uneducated woman decided to achieve justice and equality in the synagogue. But she did not find it there.”

This little “scandal” prefigured more a substantial struggle against this “pure” “bourgeois” place. In October 1924, it was reported that at a non-party conference of the “Jewish proletariat” of Odessa, twenty thousand Jewish workers complained that the Brodsky synagogue was a “nest” of counter-revolution and demanded it be converted into a cultural center since only Soviet power allows the full development of the cultures of national minorities. In March 1925, more than a thousand members of the Rosa Luxemburg Club, mainly for leather workers (a common trade for Jewish workers), filled the now “former synagogue” for a celebration of the anniversary of the February 1917 revolution, enjoying the “joyous and festive light pouring down from the chandeliers and high glass windows. Above us, a bust of Lenin shut the black rotting skeleton of the tablets [of the ten commandments]. And below this on the former alter were heard speeches that knit together words of freedom and victory. Speakers noted that this
holiday of the workers was being celebrated in a fortress of the enemy, where the remnants of
darkness were dissipated by the bright light of truth and knowledge.” A couple of months later,
the former synagogue officially became the new home of the Rosa Luxemburg Club. The
chairman of the Odessa Komsomol, Comrade Krutilov, gave the opening speech at the
ceremonial dedication: “Here in the very place where not long ago the Jewish bourgeoisie
pronounced their hypocritical prayers to god, which they never believed, today we celebrate the
opening of a workers’ club, a new hearth for culture.” Other speeches followed a similar theme.
The ceremony ended with a choir singing in Russian and Yiddish and a dramatic reading of
Peretz by the actress K. Fridman. The following day, the great Yiddish actor Solomon Mikhoels
visited Odessa and gave a talk on theater at the synagogue-turned-workers’ club.

A few tentative conclusions:

What do these stories tell us? I will suggest a few tentative lines of possible
interpretation.

Shadows. If Benya Krik was a bright shadow of both lost time and possibility in his
cream pants and raspberry boots (malinovye shhtibleti—possibly a pun on the slang [malina] for a
criminal operation), the transgressive street Jews of the 1920s (and perhaps their Jewish judicial
and political opponents) were his darker tangible shadows: less funny, less colorful, and less
prosperous, but no less able to “fight in public squares” and even win.

Gender. If Benya Krik, “the King,” embodied, if only as text, the virile male answer to
the emasculated diasporic Jew—and to oppressive patriarchies embodied in his own father, other
old men, the tsar, and Jewish traditions—the actual anti-heroes of the street (who became textual
spectacles, too, through the daily press) were likely to be tough, even swaggering, Jewish women
such as Feiga Di Roite, Gold-Tooth Khasia, and the many malina mistresses. Here too we see a
suggestion, in crooked orientations to powerful norms, through transgression and marginality, of
present and future possibilities.

“Refusal” is a more ambiguous category for all this than “resistance,” but closer to
describing how many ordinary people in conditions of inequality and oppression act. Marginality
can be turned into weapon—a “weapon of the weak,” as James Scott famously argue—but no
less potent a way to survive and be recognized as having presence.
To be at home in the modern city. Finally, and trying methodologically to approach elusive experience of the past as practiced and inhabited at the moment in which it is live—history as Erlebnis more than as Erfahrung, the usually historical narrative focusing on interpreting teleologies—I am thinking about these stories of the street as exemplars of the modern urban experience. Walter Benjamin, who more than anyone directed us back to Charles Baudelaire’s foundational definition of “modern” life, described the street (partly in his own words and partly through the words of others, in Convolute M, “The Flâneur,” of his Arcades Project of the 1930s) as a haunting landscape of intoxicating dreams, a “hunting ground” and wilderness prowl by werewolves, a space “without thresholds,” “wilder at night than a forest,” that “conducts the flâneur into a vanished time,” that is a place for an “idleness” than “is a demonstration against the division of labor,” a world of “estrangement and surprise” that is an antidote to “our standardized and uniform world.” The flaneuring explorer who can know and feel at home in this world is both the surveilling detective and the one who “takes refuge in the shadow of cities.”

For the flâneur, as the idealized embodiment of the modern personality (quoting Benjamin quoting Baudelaire from “The Painter of Modern Life,” 1863), …it is an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite. To be away from home and yet to feel oneself everywhere at home; to see the world, to be at the center of the world, and yet to remain hidden from the world…. The lover of universal life enters into the crowd as though it were an immense reservoir of electric energy. Or we might liken him to a mirror as vast as the crowd itself; or to a kaleidoscope endowed with consciousness, which, with each one of its movements, represents the multiplicity of life and the flickering grace of all the elements of life.

Here is the cosmopolitan: no longer diasporically homeless (though still existentially “away from home”), for finding a home in the “fugitive” street, in the world, and embracing the multiplicity of universal life. No doubt, this story had a different and perhaps more compelling meaning to a Marxist Jew like Benjamin at constant danger in Hitler’s Europe, and for the likes of Isaac Babel and Benya Krik, than it did for Baudelaire.

On the streets of Odessa in the 1920s, in the struggling Moldavanka (our own Convolute M?), we see many “fugitives” are at home in the streets, whose interior dwelling is “the ebb and
flow” of modern life. They enjoyed a deep and intimate knowledge of the city: whom to rob and when, how to disappear, who to work with and be wary of. They found the indulgencies and transgressions of the present intoxicating (often literally) and contributed to them, alongside Russians, Ukrainians, Greeks, Turks, Chinese, Roma, and other “Odessans.” This was a world of cosmopolitanism and emancipation that was not exactly what communists had in mind, but was not easy to dismiss or suppress.

But I cannot end on this positive and hopeful note. The epigraph, from a poem Benjamin quotes in his Arcades Project, points into these darker shadows. So do stories such as that of diseased and homeless Borya, who did not always feel “immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude,” which he literally had to do every day and night of his life. So do the stories of the victims of crime, who were often neighbors of the perpetrators. Many of these stories ended in prison and death. And alongside (and even identical with) saucy women malina-keepers were women who suffered abuse and trafficking for the greater benefit of others. But neither should we romanticize the historical rightness of the judges, policemen, and communists who fought to crush this world in the name of their vision of universal life. “Avenues devious and straight” all had their costs.

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1 This research has so far only included two months in Odessa (also two months in Leningrad, though that city is no longer part of this project) and a few weeks in New York archives. This summer I will be in Mumbai for two months of research on Bombay. This is only a start for each city.

2 Sarah Ahmed, Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others (Durham, 2006). See also José Esteban Muñoz, Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity (New York, 2009).


5 Isaak Babel, “Moi listki: Publichnaia biblioteka,” Zhurnal zhurnalov 48 (1916); “Moi listki: Deviat’,” Zhurnal zhurnalov 49 (1916); “Moi listki: Odessa,” Zhurnal zhurnalov 51 (December 1916).

6 Babel “How It Was Done in Odessa” (Kak eto delalos ’ v Odesse, first published in Литературные приложения к «Известиям Одесского губисполкома, 5 May 1923 (№ 1025)),

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7 For a recent version of this argument (each scholar, including me, offering a variation on these themes), see Efraim Sicher, “Isaak Babel’s “Odessa Tales”: Inventing Lost Time and the Search for Cultural Identity,” Russian Review 77 (January 2018): 65-87, esp. 81.

8 DAOO (Derzhavnyi arkhiv Odes’koi Oblasti / The State Archive of the Odessa Region), fond R-107 (Odessa region militia and criminal investigation), opis’ 1, delo 648 (1923), list 117.

9 For example, Vecherniaia izvestiia, 31 October 1925, 4.

10 DAOO, f. R-107, op. 1, d. 648 (1923), l. 200.

11 DAOO, f. R-107, op. 1, d. 827 (1924), l. 114.

12 DAOO, f. R-107, op. 1, d. 638 (1923), l. 43.


14 “Moldavanka,” Vecherniaia izvestiia, 26 May 1923, 3.


21 DAOO, f. R-4550, op. 1, d. 251 (1925), l. 1-8.

22 For the latter, DAOO, f. R-4550, op. 1, d. 251, l. 130.

23 DAOO, f. R-107, op. 1, d. 639, l. 27.

24 DAOO, f. R-107, op. 1, d. 648, l. 44.

25 DAOO, f. R-107, op. 1, d. 826, l. 3.

26 Vecherniaia izvestiia, 14 February 1924, 4.

27 DAOO, f. R-107, op. 1, d. 827, l. 106.

28 DAOO, f. R-107, op. 1, d. 827, l. 153ob.


30 DAOO, f. R-4550, op. 1, d. 251, l. 1.

31 DAOO, f. R-4550, op. 1, d. 251, l. 6.

32 DAOO, f. R-4550, op. 1, d. 251, l. 10.

33 DAOO, f. R-4550, op. 1, d. 251, l. 51.

34 DAOO, f. R-4550, op. 1, d. 251, l. 74.
35 DAOO, f. R-4550, op. 1, d. 251, l. 107.
36 DAOO, f. R-4550, op. 1, d. 251, l. 105ob.
38 DAOO, f. R-4550, op. 1, d. 423 [1928], l. 34.
39 Vecherniaia izvestiiia, 1 March, 3 March, 5 August, 7-15 August, 18 August, 1924
43 “Otkrytiia kluba im. Roza Liuksemburg,” Vecherniaia izvestiiia, 9 June 1925, 3; Vecherniaia izvestiiia, 10 June 1925, 3.
44 James Scott, Weapons of the Weak and Domination and the Arts of Resistance.