Odessa, little and large

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I was curious to see Odessa - Ukraine’s principal port on the northern shore of the Black Sea – because that was the city from where my grandparents emigrated to London in 1906. A few weeks earlier, I had been in Little Odessa, otherwise known as Brighton Beach, Brooklyn, New York City (and reputed money-laundering centre of the USA). Little Odessa is populated almost entirely with emigrants from Ukraine, and the ambience is markedly unamerican: shop signs in Cyrillic, bad-tempered waiters, no credit cards accepted…

On international business flights, most passengers are men, but on the short journey from Istanbul to the real Odessa nearly all my fellow-travellers were women – looking prosperous and glamorous in a slightly old-fashioned way, and laden with shopping they were bringing home to Odessa.

I had been invited by the Institute of Optics of Odessa University. They specialise in photographic science, and were proud that Lippmann, one of the pioneers of colour photography, was a native of their city. However, they reserved particular reverence for Sir Nevill Mott, who elucidated the physics of the photographic process in the 1940s, and they were surprised to learn that at that time he was head of our Bristol physics department. Against my wishes, my hosts insisted on prolonging my lecture and hobbling my delivery by providing simultaneous translation, even
though almost everybody in the audience could understand my spoken English.

Odessa is an architecturally homogeneous nineteenth-century city, not unlike Paris or Bucharest, albeit a little tattier though being sensitively restored. I was taken to the Potemkin Steps, and proudly informed that the baby in the famous pram scene in Eisenstein’s film ‘Battleship Potemkin’ later became a director of the physics department. Viewed from the top, the steps are invisible, and only the horizontal pavements separating the several flights can be seen, whereas from the bottom only the steps can be seen; my hosts seemed unaware that this locally celebrated geometrical property is shared by almost all steps consisting of several flights. Another tourist sight is the English Club. When I asked why this was so named, I was told that it had been a club for Victorian sea captains: “No women; no conversation” (no comment).

Since my hotel was the second best in Odessa, I expected it to be good, but my hosts warned me that I should expect only the second best. And indeed, the door to the refrigerator in my room fell off when I tried to open it, and the shower head suddenly flew off the wall and drenched my clothes, towels, toilet paper… I was disturbed by a sequence of mysterious phone calls, in which a young woman first asked questions in Russian and, when I didn’t understand, began screaming as though she were being tortured; I suspected a trick, and indeed was told that this is a common prostitute’s ruse for gaining entry into hotel rooms.

Odessans like to be first and best, especially with jokes. For example, common throughout eastern Europe is the explanation of why policemen always go in threes: one to read, one to write, and one to guard the two
intellectuals. But in the Odessa version, one student is telling this story to another, when he feels a tap on the shoulder, and is terrified to discover that he had been overheard by three policemen, one of whom demands his documents, then turns to his companions and asks: “Now, which of you two can read?”… People were generally friendly in this jocular way, but my hosts were evidently embarrassed when we were accosted on the street by one person who made what was obviously an antisemitic gesture of extreme crudity.

I found an internet cafe. Most of the other customers were boys exploring violent and pornographic sites, but there was another foreigner, an American evidently hotmailing his travel diary home, who asked: “Excuse me, what city is this?” I could not believe this stereotype of the ignorant tourist, but he told me that he had travelled overnight on a cruise from Yalta, and had forgotten today’s port of call. Later, in the harbour, I saw his brand-new eleven-storey cruise ship.

On the road outside the city, we encountered a surreal convoy of poor people celebrating a wedding. With the bride and groom in pushchairs, the men blowing raucous horns and dressed in clowns’ clothes, pressing vodka and sausages on every motorist who slowed to observe them, and the thickly rouged women reeking of perfume (which they transferred to me with abundant and insistent kisses), it resembled a scene from a film by Fellini.

I needed to get to Crimea to attend an optics meeting. The only way was by overnight train, and my hosts advised me to buy a return ticket for a companion to ensure my safety. But the ‘companion’ was a physicist who wanted to attend the same meeting, so the safety scare could have been a
scam to get his fare paid (it was only £10, but not a trivial sum for a university scientist in Ukraine, so I paid up). Ukraine is a country of unreformed smokers, and I wondered whether my night on the sleeper would be tormented by their fumes. With unintentional ambiguity, I was firmly informed that in train compartments “anybody smokes”. Fortunately they meant nobody, and the night passed comfortably. We arrived in Simferopol, capital of Crimea, fresh for the conference on the coast in Alushta; but that is another story.

**Caption for the figure**

Courtyard in old Odessa (photo by Sergei Gavrilov)