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Is Argentine tango Russian, and how Jewish is Russian tango?

...now I'm here, I'm dancing a tango

(BERNSTEIN, *CANDIDE*)

Introduction

Ever since I personally and quite accidentally stepped into the tango scene in Chicago, I have been intrigued by the history of tango in Russia. The process of unwrapping Russian infatuation with sound, movement, and the social implications of tango guided me to a surprising significant link, little explored in scholarship, between tango and Jews. This paper attempts to entwine two dramatic immigration stories, of Jews and tango. The identification of Russian Jews in the US diaspora with tango flows from an involvement with tango that predates the Russian Revolution, manifests itself in Russian modernism, and has a unique connection with the culture of Odessa.

Personal

When late evening descends on the city and most Chicagoans are about to slip into pajamas, I pull out my pumps and whatever glittering decoration I can find – earrings, a bracelet, a belt, and a dress with slits that enable swift steps. A professor goes to town; a magical word – tango – transports me to a different world called “milonga” – a place for tango dances where I and hundreds of others plunge into a weekly reunion of music, gliding, pivoting, ornamenting that suspends time. About the time I immigrated to the US in the mid-1990s, «nomadic milongas [...] were mushrooming. [...] Tango dancing was rapidly turning into a unique social field that brought together a diverse crowd of cosmopolitan regulars and tango artists of different nationalities» – writes Anahí Viladrich about Manhattan.¹

¹ ANAHÍ VILADRICH, *More Than Two to Tango: Argentine Tango Immigrants in New York City*, Tucson, University of Arizona Press, 2013, p. 47.

Tango connected two barely related things in my life. One is the insomnia that developed during the years when I, a single mother and recent immigrant from Baku (in the former Soviet Azerbaijan, now the Azerbaijani State), launched my doctoral study in ethnomusicology, completing degrees while teaching as an adjunct, afterwards stepping onto the academic tenure-track rails. Dancing occupies my restless nocturnal hours; its physical/emotional intensity provides good sleep afterwards. But tango also draws on my youth, when infatuated with popular dance, I found myself choreographing the first cabaret music show in Azerbaijan – a show with dances that afterwards toured to Moscow and Eastern Europe. This pivot to tango connected my present with my almost forgotten past. Perhaps the nostalgic tone, the melancholy embedded in tango music explains tango's strong connection with immigrants. But there is something else in a dance that demands a powerful "axis". However exuberant the move, the two tango partners leaning in embrace must each keep their own perfect balance. Even when rapidly pulled forward (by a partner) in a *volcada*, dropped into the unknown, the follower – typically a woman – craves for and immediately retrieves her axis. The sense of maintaining equilibrium during a head-spinning move is an immigrant's metaphorical goal.

About tango

The recordings of Argentine *orquestas típicas* from 1930-1950s constitute the core repertoire for tango dancers, who listen to music through movement. Every step, every turn, slow, quick, intentionally suspended or disrupted, celebrates the union of sound and motion. Tango dancing falls into three domains identified with different social, performative, and commercial spaces. The three groups vary by the type of teaching, purpose, and dance category. Tango as a ballroom dance belongs to the category of American/International dances along with waltz, foxtrot, Viennese waltz, and quickstep. A ballroom tango performer trains with a permanent partner; posture and steps, polished to perfection, are honed for competition. The second category – tango choreographed for staged shows, musicals, and reviews – is performed by professional dancers. The third category, social tango, is improvised and danced by amateurs. Both staged and ballroom tangos are intended for spectators' appreciation; social tango aims inward, mythologizing the internal connection between partners, *abrazo* (embrace), the base and pinnacle of the dance.

While vociferously disregarding external appearance in favor of inner fulfillment, social dancers study arduously. The website *TangoMango*² lists weekly group classes, private

² www.tangomango.org (last accessed 30 September 2017).

lessons, weekend boot camps, and visiting master courses. Social tango dancers learn their clearly differentiated roles of leader and follower, typically a man and a woman, both developing the same technique but contrasting sensibilities. The milonga, where people gather to dance tango, encourages social mingling; the partners change for each *tanda* – a group of three or four dances. Inserted between *tandas*, a *cortina* – a brief musical intermission – contrasts with tango music. This interlude embodies the fancy of the tango DJ, a highly contested and respected position in the tango subculture, as much as the DJ’s choice of music for each *tanda*. Music is central to tango.

The Chicago Tango Scene

I began learning the dance with my neighbor, whose availability at any time, merely descending from the eleventh story to my third-floor apartment in the same building, made tango doable. My path of studying and practicing tango began with a Columbian tango instructor in the Chicago Latvian Community Center, then with my Italian partner, my Turkish tango master, and a Filipino Chicagoan, showing the international appeal of tango, reminding one about the immigrant roots of the Argentine dance. Viladrich writes: «The mixed ferment in the slums of Montevideo and Buenos Aires brought together Italians, Spaniards, and Poles, along with an ethnically diverse blend of people, including African descendants».³

The most striking discovery in my time on the Chicago tango scene has been the proliferation of immigrants from different parts of the former Soviet Union, all speaking Russian, a majority of them Jewish. Over a dozen milongas are held in Chicago weekly, at least four hosted by “Russians”. Much like dancers transformed when going to milonga, the places for tango are also altered. The Latvian Center becomes the exotic La Bruja every Thursday night, and one Friday a month it turns into Milonga Porteña. The Forever Young Adult Day Care, servicing primarily retired Soviet immigrants, is converted into Los Besos Milonguita organized by Oleg and Lena Mashkovich, the finalists in the Tango San Francisco Festival 2015. An immigrant from the Soviet Union owns Artango Bistro, which features South American cuisine, tango classes, and weekly dinner/dance parties. The question of why and how immigrants from different parts of the former Soviet Union acquired affection for tango led me to historical accounts.

³ A. VILADRICH, *More Than Two to Tango*, cit., p. 32.

The Origins of Tango

Tango is widely known as a dance that started, as Viladrich notes, in «the slums and port area» of Buenos Aires and moved «to the tenement houses of Palermo and La Boca with their *cafetines cantantes* (singing small cafes) around 1910 and finally to its ultimate success in Paris in 1912».⁴ As Viladrich states,

ultimately, the tango achieved upward mobility in two ways: from its darker working-class origins to its acceptance by the white middle and upper strata; and from the active sensuality of the dance form to an emphasis on the tango song – or a shift from the feet to the mouth.⁵

What interests me is the entanglement of tango with the Russian-Jewish diaspora during the early 20th century. Marilyn Miller observed:

tango history also intersects with African and Jewish diasporas in the region in surprising ways. [...] Julio Nudler and José Judkovski have [...] shown how tango bisects twentieth-century Jewish history, both in the Southern Cone and in Europe. Tango was very popular in Berlin, Vienna, and other European cultural capitals by the 1930s, and these scholars note that Jews imprisoned in concentration camps in Germany, Poland, and elsewhere composed many tangos, including some in Yiddish.⁶

My focus in this paper, as I try to understand the prominence of Russian Jews in the American tango scene, is the significance of tango in the intellectual circles of Soviet Russia and meaning of tango in the Jewish culture of Odessa. A significant person in this story is Isabella (Isa) Kremer, a young Jewess from Odessa in south of Russian Empire who studied voice in Italy, visited Paris, and became a pivotal figure in the popularity of tango music in early 20th century Russia.

Russia's Early Infatuation with Tango

Russia caught the tango bug at the rise of the 20th century. Exported to Paris by musicians like Angel Villoldo as early as in 1907, tango quickly spread through Europe. According to historian Louise McReynold, “tango mania” engulfed Russian capitals in the 1910s. «As World War I drew Russia closer to its rendezvous with revolution, tango became the musical theme for a society that stood on the brink».⁷ In an imaginative scenario by a

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 35.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 26.

⁶ MARILYN G. MILLER, Introduction to *Tango Lessons: Movement, Sound, Image, and Text in Contemporary Practice*, ed. by Marilyn G. Miller, Durham, Duke University Press, 2014, p. 11.

contemporary screenwriter Andrei Osinenko, as Russians rushed to celebrate the last pre-World War One New Year, «the shops glibly sell the new Champagne, Tango».⁸

In tango, «an emblem of radical chic, of sexual emancipation and ethical iconoclasm»,⁹ art converged with life. In 1911, the champion of Russian cubism, Kazimir Malevich, drew, guache on paper, *Argentinian polka* [tango], a dancing couple – a tuxedoed man and a woman in white against a red background. In summer 1913, painter Mikhail Larionov, aiming to join art and life, walked the Moscow streets with his face painted. His fellow futurist artists, including Natalia Goncharova, followed, drawing on their faces with abstract geometric designs, «the hieroglyph, the rebus, the chance item of graffiti, the secret message».¹⁰ Giving an interview, Larionov chalked a hieroglyph on the face of his interlocutor, offering a single word explanation – «a tango, do you understand now?». The futurist manifesto *Why do we paint ourselves*, signed by Larionov and cinematographer Mikhail Zdanevich, reads «our faces are like the screech of the trolley warning hurrying passers-by, like the drunken sounds of the great tango».¹¹

And it navigated across different artistic media – music, poetry, ballet, theater, cinema, painting. In 1914, futurist painter Vasily Kamensky published a “ferroconcrete” collection of twelve poems entitled *Tango with Cows*. The letters and words turned into graphics, the poems-paintings are often discussed in terms of cartography and “spatial orchestration”. Goncharova, while experimenting with neo-primitivism and rayonism, and while designing costumes of Queen of Shemakha, Sea Princess, and the Golden Cockerel for the Ballets Russes, also made tango dresses for “the queen of tango”, Elza Kreger. In the long lost cinema *Drama in the Futurist Cabaret #13* (1914), Goncharova herself enacted the *tangistka* (female dancer) who performed tango and was killed by her lover. The acting cast included the giant of Russian modernism, poet Vladimir Mayakovsky.

⁷ BRUCE LINCOLN, *Sunlight at Midnight: St. Petersburg and the Rise of Modern Russia*, New York, Basic Books, 2000, p. 203. Also cf. YURI TSIVIAN, *The Tango in Russia*, «Experiment: A Journal of Russian Culture», II, 2 (1996), pp. 307-334; cf. VASILY KAMENSKY, *Tango With Cows: Ferro-Concrete Poems*, with additional illustrations by the brothers David and Vladimir Burlyuk, Moscow, limited ed., 1914.

⁸ ANDREY OSINENKO, *Drama, Fars, Comediia*, 1996, <http://comedy-farce.ru/1913.html> (last accessed 30 September 2017).

⁹ JOHN E. BOWLT, *Body Beautiful: The Artistic Search for the Perfect Physics*, in *Laboratory of Dreams: The Russian Avant-garde and Cultural Experiment*, ed. by John E. Bowlt - Olga Matich, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1996, p. 53.

¹⁰ ID., *Faces Painted with Fanciful Patterns*, in CCCP, ed. by Jan van der Eng - Willem G. Weststeijn, Amsterdam – Atlanta (GA), Rodopi, 1991, p. 73 («Avant Garde», 5-6).

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

distorted dances beginning with a tango and followed by waltz and ragtime (the violin was one of the main instruments in early days of Argentine tango).¹³ Stravinsky's sad sick dance, composed and premiered in Lausanne, expressed despair over war losses, while reflecting Stravinsky's view of the Soviet revolution. Initial laconic motives above Stravinsky's tango rhythms gradually crystallize into a Dies Irae with tango itself no longer abiding metrical consistency.¹⁴

Poco più mosso. (♩ = 92–96)

The image shows a musical score for three instruments: Violin (VI.), Percussion (Perc.), and Clarinet (Cl.). The score is in 2/4 time and consists of four measures. The tempo is marked 'Poco più mosso' with a quarter note equal to 92-96 beats per minute. The key signature has one sharp (F#). The Violin part features a melodic line with eighth and sixteenth notes. The Percussion part has a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes. The Clarinet part has a melodic line with eighth and sixteenth notes, often in pairs.

Igor Stravinsky, Tango from *L'histoire du soldat*, *Trois Danses*, mm. 60-66.

The song, the dance, and the very concept of tango appeared both broad and ambiguous enough to become a symbol of the avant-garde and simultaneously a target for avant-gardists. It signified the conflicting aspiration of Russian modernists to get «away from the West»¹⁵ and yet embodied their desire to be wedded with European and American fashion. At the peak of Russian social and political turmoil, tango, extending far beyond simple songs, teary verses, and dance, navigated between experimental, classical, and popular music and crossed boundaries between different art forms – poetry and prose, theater, film, painting, caricature, ballet.

¹³ The predecessors of tango bands in the late 19th century consisted of flute, guitar, and violin, cf. CHRISTINE DENNISTON, *The Meaning of Tango: The Story of the Argentinian Dance*, London, Anova Books, 2007, p. 65.

¹⁴ Cf. Stravinsky's sketches in *Stravinsky's Histoire du soldat: A Facsimile of the Sketches*, ed. by Maureen Carr, Middleton (WI), A-R Editions, 2005, p. 272.

¹⁵ NATALIA GONCHAROVA, *The Rise of Russian Art* (1913): <http://arthistoryproject.com/artists/natalia-goncharova/the-rise-of-russian-art> (last accessed 30 September 2017).

Russian-French Connection between Tango and Carmen

...mais d'un air de défi
Rita se livre et tout bas l'homme rit
Disant parmi les chants les cris

(DOLOIRE/FOUCHER, *LE DERNIER TANGO*)

La voilà! La voilà!
Voilà la Carmencita!

(BIZET, *CARMEN*)

When Isa Kremer visited Paris, she, along with many Parisians, fell for *Le Dernier Tango* by Émile Doloire and Armand Foucher, performed by a legendary chanteuse, Yvette Guibert.¹⁶ The melody of this tango was 'borrowed' from an Argentine original, "El choclo", by Buenos Aires' composer and cabaret singer Angel Villoldo, who toured Paris in 1907. Foucher published the songs, words, and even more important the story about a Paraguayan traveler who, in a Parisian cabaret, meets and falls in love with Rita, a tango dancer. After squandering his fortune, she leaves him a pauper. A vagabond, he sees her dancing in Montmartre. Begging Rita for a last dance, he kills her.

The story echoes well-known and beloved *Carmen*, both Prosper Mérimée's novel and the opera by Georges Bizet. In the opera, Mercedes and Frasquita warn the indomitable Carmen against facing her abandoned José. In Foucher/Villoldo's song, it is Rita's friend who whispers to a Parisian tango libertine the very same words:

Prends garde à toi, Rita! Soufflé une amie...
Vois donc ses yeux!

The refrain of the song, «C'est sous le ciel de l'Argentine / Où la femme est toujours divine» has no relevance to either the plot or the geography (to Paraguay or Paris).

While the connection between tango and *Carmen* in Russia has not been discussed, another aspect to this link is ever more intriguing. It has been established that Mérimée's novel (1845), which served as the basis for Bizet's *Carmen*, was strongly influenced by Russian Alexander Pushkin's *Tsygane* [Gypsies, 1825].¹⁷ In Pushkin's story, a young protagonist Aleko, loved by a proud gypsy, abandons «his people, fatherland, the city life [...] huge

¹⁶ Yvette Guibert «revolutionized French songs and singing»; entrepreneurs from European and American reviews sought an opportunity to book her tours. «Guy de Maupassant supplied her first name, Yvette. Toulouse-Lautrec painted her. Aristide Bruant wrote songs for her», *Vaudeville old & new: an Encyclopedia of Variety Performances in America*, ed. by Frank Cullen with Florence Hackman - Donald McNeilly, vol. I, New York - London, Routledge, 2006, p. 464.

¹⁷ Cf. DAVID A. LOWE, *Pushkin and Carmen*, «19th-Century Music», XX, 1 (Summer 1996), pp. 72-76.

palaces, games and parties and the wealthy maids». Two summers later, bored by her jealous companion, the gypsy taunts him: «Old man, spiteful man, stab me, burn me. Firm I stand – not afraid of your knife». Seeing her in love with another, Aleko kills his Gypsy lover.

Russians, whether or not knowing about the connection between Pushkin's poem and Bizet's *Carmen*, have been well acquainted with both. And in the last decade of the 19th century, Russian opera goers saw the premiere of Rachmaninov's opera *Aleko* (1892) based on Pushkin's *Tsygane* and unmistakably indebted to Bizet.

In Odessa, the story of the talented and enterprising Isa Kremer was fashioned into *The Last Tango*, which became the plotline for a movie with the same title (1918). This film preceded another silent American movie, *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (1921), which starred both tango and Rudolph Valentino. The Russian and American films share a story of romance, passion, and death. Their protagonists travel from Buenos Aires to Paris, evoking the tango poetics of «a rebellious broad» / femme fatale and an aggressive yet «whiny ruffian». ¹⁸ Both films feature a tango performed by the lead couple. The plotlines, settings, and characters, and the prominence of music/dance in both silent films – the shadowy tavern, the heroine in quasi Spanish/gypsy attire, the link between habanera and tango, passionate love and death – again evoke strong association with *Carmen*.

The cinematic *Last Tango* was released twenty-six years after the premiere of Rachmaninov's opera, and both *Aleko* and *Carmen* were staged in major Russian opera houses. There are no available records about the music played during the film. Conceivably *The Last Tango* was accompanied with a live performance of Kremer's romance drawing on exotic Argentina. But Kremer's tango and the film could also evoke in Russian audience the deeply seeded musical and literary association with widely popular operatic repertoire, including Russia's own.

Touring and migrating Jewish musicians

Tango links the Argentine capital with southern and sultry coastal Odessa. The two cities share some basic traits. Both became bustling ports and trade centers in the late decades of the 19th century. The flow of immigrants increased the population of newly established Odessa from 2,250 in 1795 to 25,000 twenty years later, and to over 630,000 at the rise of the 20th century. Likewise, because of mass migration, the population of Buenos Aires doubled in the last decades of the 18th and the first decade of the 19th century. And by

¹⁸ MARTA SAVIGLIANO, *Tango and the Political Economy of Passion*, Boulder (CO), Westview Press, 1995, p. 53.

the early nineteenth century, about a half population of Buenos Aires was foreign-born.¹⁹ Both immigrant hubs, Odessa and Buenos Aires, attracted a significant Jewish population. At the time tango was born in Buenos Aires, Odessa's Jewish community was «the engine of the city's economic life.»²⁰ Next to the magnificent Odessa Opera House stood the Grand Choral Synagogue. The proximity of the two is mirrored in Buenos Aires's Templo Libertad or the Templo de la Congregación Israelita Argentina on the corner of famous Teatro Colón.

Central to dissemination of tango and to Jewish history in the early decades of the 20th century was the global physical movement of the two. A Jewish majority was ghettoized in Western Europe and in Russian Pale of Settlement. Against this impeded mobility, Eastern Jewry fostered network relations among dispersed communities. Across national, ethnic, and linguistic European borders, Jewish entrepreneurs navigated using Yiddish and local languages; musicians employing their bi-tri-musicality.

Scholars exploring Jewish communities in Eastern Europe frequently focus on cultures of shtetls or urban centers. I am interested in the movement between the complex system of veins, arteries, and capillaries that, the life of the community, also streamed music.

At the rise of the 20th century, Jews from Eastern Europe began both migration and immigration. Touring Jewish entertainers developed a quick wit for what works – absorbing, adapting, and transmitting. Mass Jewish immigration in the early 20th century took two directions – to historical land and over the Atlantic Ocean – as a part of an immigration flow from North to South America.²¹ Although a minority in Argentina, the Jewish community, under 1,000 at the close of the 19th century, increased to 378,000 by 1949,²² Jewish population of Buenos Aires second only to New York in the Americas.

¹⁹ Cf. RAANAN REIN, *Argentine Jews or Jewish Argentines? Essays on Ethnicity, Identity, and Diaspora*, Leiden – Boston, Brill, 2010, p. 28; cf. JASON WILSON, *Buenos Aires: A Cultural and Literary History*, Oxford, Signal Books, 1999, p. 18.

²⁰ King writes that by the early 1900s, «around the two-thirds of the handicraft shops and industrial enterprises, nearly 70 percent of the trading companies, and nearly 90 percent of the grain-trading firms had Jewish proprietors», CHARLES KING, *Odessa: Genius and Death in a City of Dreams*, New York – London, W. W. Norton & Company, 2011, p. 98.

²¹ Argentine President Julio Roca called to «promote and direct the Israelite immigration from Russia to Argentina (August 18, 1881)», AMALIA RAN, *Made of Shores: Judeo-Argentinean Fiction Revisited*, Bethlehem (PA), Lehigh University Press, 2011, p. 7.

²² Cf. RONALD NEWTON, *German Nazism and the Origins of Argentine Anti-Semitism*, in *The Jewish Diaspora in Latin America: New Studies on History and Literature*, ed. by David Scheinin - Lois Baer Barr, New York – London, Routledge, 1996, p. 201; cf. JOSÉ C. MOYA, *The Jewish Experience in Argentina in a Diasporic Comparative Perspective*, in *The New Jewish Argentina: Facets of Jewish Experiences in the Southern Cone*, ed. by Adriana Brodsky - Ranaan Rein, Leiden – Boston, Brill, 2013, p. 8.

In Argentina Jewish musicians, whether trained in classical music, vaudeville, or klezmer, joined tango orchestras. While brothers El Alemán né Arturo Bernstein (bandoneón) and guitarist Luis Bernstein,²³ and the three brothers Rubenstein (Oscar Rubens, Luis, Elías Randal) played tango in Argentina,²⁴ Ettore and Giuseppe Colombo played tango in Italy,²⁵ and Henryk and Arthur Gold championed jazz and tango in Poland. The Golds collaborated with legendary Jerzy Petersburski. Composed by Petersburski and played by his orchestra in Vienna, *Tango Milonga* was remade into a German *Oh Donna Clara!* which, moving to the United States, was premiered by Al Jolson.²⁶ Jewish Argentine tango musicians touring the United States and Europe shared the same circuits as their counterparts, whether from Odessa, Warsaw or elsewhere by the beginning of the World War II, which changed everything.

«Tell me where should I go?»²⁷ poses a tango composed in 1940 by the Latvian king of tango Oscar Strock and poet Igor S. Korntayer.²⁸ Sixteen years later, an American born of Ukrainian Jewish parents Leonard Bernstein delivered his hit, *I am Easily Assimilated*, arguably the most memorable from his musical *Candide*:²⁹

My father came from Rovno Gubernya [Ukraine].
But now I'm here, I'm dancing a tango
My father spoke a High Middle Polish.
In a half-hour I'm talking in Spanish:
Por favor! Toreador!
I am easily assimilated.

²³ Cf. AMALIA RAN, *Tristes Alegrías: The Jewish Presence in Argentina's Popular Music Arena*, in *Mazal Tov, Amigos! Jews and Popular Music in the Americas*, ed. by Amalia Ran - Moshe Morad, Leiden - Boston, Brill, 2016, pp. 44-59: 50. Also listen to *Quinteto Criollo El Alemán y Quinteto Criollo Tano Genaro*, music by Bernstein, Arturo and Espósito Genaro, *El Bandoneón*, © 2001, cd; *Antología del Tango Rioplatense*, vol. 1 (1907-1920), RGS Music, © 2015, cd.

²⁴ Cf. JULIO NUDLER, *Tango judío: del ghetto a la milonga*, Buenos Aires, Editorial Sudamericana, 1998, pp. 261-270.

²⁵ Cf. JOSÉ JUDKOVSKI, *El tango: una historia con judíos*, Buenos Aires, Fundación IWO, 1998, p. 89.

²⁶ Cf. IGOR PIETRASZEWSKI, *Jazz in Poland: Totalitarianism, Stalinism, Socialist Realism*, in *Jazz and Totalitarianism*, ed. by Bruce Johnson, New York - London, Routledge - Taylor & Francis, 2017, pp. 94-113: 98.

²⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=paCyqYX-SC> (last accessed 30 September 2017).

²⁸ Strock, born into a family of Jewish musicians in Daugavpils, educated in St. Petersburg, exiled in Western Europe, living the war years in Kazakhstan, afterward was «cast into personal and professional disrepute [...] for “formalist tendencies” and “bourgeois influences” [...] in the wake of Stalin’s dissolution of the Yevresky Antifashistsky Komitet (Jewish Antifascist Committee) and the subsequent crackdown on so-called cosmopolitan culture. In this charged climate, the government’s cultural watchdogs viewed Strock’s worldwide fame with suspicion», BRET WERB, “Vu ahin zol ikh geyn?” *Music Culture of Jewish Displaced Persons*, in *Dislocated Memories: Jews, Music, and Postwar German Culture*, ed. by Tina Frühauf - Lily Hirsch, Oxford - New York, Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 78.

²⁹ Cf. ADAM ROVNER, *So Easily Assimilated: The New Immigrant Chic*, «AJS Review», XXX, 2 (November 2006), pp. 313-324.

Jews Entangoed in Sunny, Sultry Odessa

A Tatar outpost that Catherine II acquired in the Great in Russo-Turkish war 1787-1792 and built into a city, in a few decades Odessa became Russia's major international port on the Black Sea. Passing sailors, ruthless businessmen, gamblers, rogues, and poets populated this city founded by a Spaniard in the Russian service, laid out by Italian and Austrian architects and governed in its early days by Frenchmen.³⁰ Odessa is both a physical place and a myth that features Odessa as its centerpiece; as Jarrod Tenny writes, «Old Odessa is Russia's Great Southern Babylon, and successive generations of mythmakers have commemorated it in literature, film, humor and song».³¹

The ethnic, linguistic, and cultural mix of Odessa, the oral anthology of anecdotes, the musicality of Isaak Babel's *Odessa tales*, the story of violinist Sashka memorialized by Russian novelist Ivan Kuprin, the classical string school of Stoliarsky, the cabarets, the humor, the laughter, the clearly recognized accent – are all inseparable from Jewish Odessa. In the midst of a sea of shtetls in the Russian Pale of Settlement and one of a few long-settled Jewish centers (Vilna, Warsaw), rose Odessa, the only warm sunny coastal city with a significant and diverse Jewish population. At the turn of the 20th century, Jews constituted half the city population. Yiddish was the second language after Russian, which itself became infused with expressions and characteristic vocal inflections – Odessa's lexicon. The city served as the entry point and its Jews were largely responsible for pioneering Russia's early cinema, cabarets, high and low-brow cultures, jazz, and Isa Kremer's tango.

Odessa's tango wedded the city's lore with a Jewish theme. The tune of *On the Deribas Street was opened a pub* recycles Villoldo/Doloire/Kremer's inescapable tango fully assimilated as Odessa's own. The lyrics of this tango map the city from plush gaudy Deribas Street to the low-brow Jewish neighborhood of Moldovanka. Not an Argentine but an Odessan tavern gathers the shady company of thugs, girls and their fancy pimp. Several characters are identified by distinctly Jewish names – Aronchik, «looking exactly like a foreigner», and Monia – «the illegitimate offspring of a famous Odessa madam, Pesi Aleshker». The center of everyone's attention is Rosa from «Moldavanka, beautiful like a proud Grecian [...],

³⁰ At the top of famous Odessa steps stands a statue of Duc de Richelieu, one of the builders of the city. The central streets bare the names of the founders: Lanzheronskaia Street in honor of Alexander Langeron, a governor-general at the time of his name-sake Alexander Pushkin's exile in Odessa; Deribasovskaia Street after the Spanish hero of the Russian-Turkish war and the designer of Odessa, José Pascual Domingo de Ribas y Boyons (or, as Russians called him, Osip Deribas).

³¹ JARROD TANNY, *City of Rogues and Schnorrers: Russia's Jews and the Myth of Old Odessa*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2011, p. 2.

holding her “tuchus” (butt, Yiddish) like a handle in the tram». When appetizing and «already pretty perspired Rosa» greets Aronchik’s invitation to dance, a fracas breaks out. After a detailed description, the fight ends without traditional killing. The last couplets rephrase a well-known line:

It no longer looked like Argentina
When a passerby got smacked in the face
We were thrown from the pub in a moment
My friend with a bump and me with a bruise.

The tango and sunny sultry Argentina are no longer identified with exotic places far away. Witty Ostap from Odessa, (con)fusing the Argentine capital with Rio-de-Janeiro’s piers, winks at a famous Odessite jazz and tango singer Utesov, who as a young actor introduced himself as a Joe from «Bresil» – Brazil being a restaurant Deribas Street.³²

Whether Kremer’s *Last Tango* injected Odessa with a taste for a type of music and dance that befitted the very character the city, whether multiple versions of this tango were simply shaped to match the lore of the city, a number of local popular songs, no longer using the same exact melody, echoed the famous tango tune. Among them were, for example, two songs that turned into transnational shlagers. One was an Odessa’s *Kupite bubliki* [Buy bagels], the other *Kupite Papirosy* [Buy cigarettes], internationally known as Yiddish *Papirosen*.

After the Soviet revolution Isa Kremer left Russia; her song still captivates her compatriots within and outside the country. Mikhail Bulgakov, in a short story titled *The Cup of Life* (published in Berlin in 1922),³³ pictures a Moscow restaurant in which «the maître d’hôtel recites *Under the sultry sky of Argentina* to the sound of a violin».

Less than a decade later, a duo of Soviet satirical writers produced a literary character, Ostap Bender. Like his creators, the protagonist is from Odessa – a city known for its wit, cleverness, and unbounded optimism, which Bender embodies. In one of the scenes, as Ostap dreamt about his «great machinations»,

³² Cf. INNA NARODITSKAYA, *Jews, Jazz, Early Cinema in America and Stalin’s Russia*, in *Music and Minorities Around the World*, ed. by Ursula Hemetek - Essica Marks - Adelaida Reyes, Newcastle upon Tyne, Cambridge Scholars, 2014, pp. 167-185: 171.

³³ *Chasha zhizni* [Cup of Life] was published in the literary supplement to the newspaper «Nakanune» [A Day Before], December 31, 1922.

his feet in red shoes [...] began to slide soundlessly on the floor. [...] Right hand dulcetly, like a woman, embraced his folder, left hand stretched forward. Over the city clearly spread the rosin squeak of the wheel of Fortune. It was a delicate music sound which made [...] every subject around to resound. The first was a samovar. [...] It sang

Under the sultry sky of Argentina
Where the southern sky is so blue...

The great machinator [Ostap] danced classical provincial tango [...]. Over his head rustled palms and passed by colorful birds. The ocean liners rubbed their hulls on Rio-de-Janeiro's piers.³⁴

In the following decades the catchy opening line of Kremer's *Last Tango* continued circulating in literary works of Paustovsky, Aksenov, and Nabokov. The melody has attained multiple lives of its own, notably in the 1920s.

At least three versions of the same tune with the opening «in far sultry Argentina» focus on a heroine named Margo. She dances with her lover and partner, promising him «so much happiness, coiling around him like a rattlesnake, passionately snuggling up to him». Predictably, Margo, bored by her lover, betrays him with a Mexican rival. The references to Argentina, the mentioning of American restaurants, and the figure of a Mexican contender capture the cosmopolitan character of the tango. Indeed, spotting Margo in the midst of a splendid ballroom, the male protagonist invites her «exquisitely-gallantly» to dance «the last tango», stabbing her dead. Narrated in first person by the lover/killer, this tango becomes confessional.³⁵

Another song (*The History of Rabbi from Kahovka*) pokes fun at the mesmerizing imagery of the sultry Argentina by posing the question, «Why, tell [me] do you need this foreign Argentina?». Instead, this tango offers the «beautiful environs of the city Kakhovka» and refashions the blazing Argentine drama into a story about a local rabbi and his capricious daughter:³⁶

Zachem, skazhite, Vam chuzhaja Argentina? Vot Vam istorija kahovskogo ravvina Chto zhil v ujutnoj skromnoj obstanovke V uezdnom tikhom gorode Kahovke	Why, tell me, need you foreign Argentina? Here is the story of Kakhovka's rabbi Who lived in such beautiful environs In such a marvel town Kakhovka
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³⁴ ILYA IL'F - EVGENY PETROV, *Zolotoy telenok* [The Golden Calf], Sankt-Peterburg, Azbuka-klassika, 2008, p. 244.

³⁵ <http://a-pesni.org/dvor/argtango.php> (last accessed 30 September 2017).

³⁶ <http://a-pesni.org/dvor/istkahrav.php> (last accessed 30 September 2017).

«Lean like a silk ribbon, clean like just washed dishes, smart like the whole book of the Talmud», the rabbi's daughter, unable to choose between two suitors, tailor Abrashka/Abram and barber Tashka/Jacob, runs away with Russian Ivan – the new local boss, «so handsome and possible healthy». Her note, signed «Ms. Ivanova», causes a crisis in Kakhovka and possibly kills her father. The last verse, however, pictures a rabbi, «no longer praying or going to synagogue, instead shaved his beard, and turned into a dandy and an Odessa entrepreneur». Not accidentally, the metamorphosis of Jewish rabbi into an enterprising dandy took place in Odessa.

A Jewish Ukrainian poet humorist, Jacov Yadov (Botsman/Boatswain), penned the lyrics of *Bubliki/Bagels* in 1926. The day after a cabaret singer, Grigori Krasavin, first performed this newly-baked number, the whole Odessa sang the crude/cruel romance.³⁷ Based on a memorable foxtrot-type with an «unmistakable klezmer influence, complete with howling violins and clarinets», *Bagels* became one of the most famous songs in Russia during the “decadent” NEP period.³⁸ In a month or two after the song premiered in Odessa, *Bagels* reached Moscow; by the winter 1927, translated into Polish, the song became a hit in Warsaw.³⁹ Jewish immigrants from Odessa brought the song to New York, where by the end of the 1920s, the Yiddish version *Koyfn Beigelekh* sounded in the Low East Side.⁴⁰ A swinging *Bagels* launched the performing career of the aptly named Bagelman Sisters, later known as The Barry Sisters. The famous duo also performed the no less famous tango *Papirosen*, the mentioned Yiddish version of *Kupite papirosy*.

«Bagels» is a first-person account of a sobbing seventeen-year-old Odessa girl who, standing on a street corner on a dark night, begs a passerby to buy her bagels: «My father is a drunkard, my mother a sar, my sister a street walker, and brother a pick-pocket». In *Papirosen*, the seller is a crying little boy, an orphan, who clings to a building hiding from

³⁷ Cf. VLADIMIR BAKHTIN, *Zabytyi i nezabityi Yakov Iadov* [Forgotten and unforgotten Iakov Iadov], «Neva», 2001, 2, <http://a-pesni.org/dvor/bubliki.php> (last accessed 30 September 2017). The authorship of the tune is uncertain, it has been attributed to whether S. or N. Bogomazov.

³⁸ J. TANNY, *City of Rogues and Schnorrers*, cit., p. 113. Shostakovich, portraying St. Petersburg crowd in his first opera after Gogol's *Nos*, depicts a bagle seller (Act III, scene 7). McMillin notices: «Her cries of “bubliki, bubliki” maybe well have been inspired by one of the most famous song of the NEP period, the cruel romance *Kupite bubliki*», ARNOLD McMILLIN, *Gogol's “St. Petersburg Stories” in the Hands of Russian Composers*, «New Zealand Slavonic Journal», 37, 2003 (*Slavonic Journeys across the Two Hemispheres: Festschrift in honor of Arnold McMillin*), p. 176.

³⁹ Cf. TADEUSZ WITTLIN, *Pieśniarka Warszawy: Hanka Ordonówna I jej świat*, London, Polska Fundacja Kulturalna, 1985: www.vestnik.com/issues/2001/0522/win/vayner.htm (last accessed 30 September 2017)

⁴⁰ According to Gottlieb, «the Russian song, popular among Jews as *Beigelach* (Bagels) was recorded by [as if it was a pun] by Bagelman Sisters, later known as the Berry Sisters», JACK GOTTLIEB, *Funny, It Doesn't Sound Jewish: How Yiddish Songs and Synagogue Melodies Influenced Tin Pan Alley, Broadway, and Hollywood*, New York – Washington, State University of New York (SUNY) Press – Library of Congress, 2004, p. 72.

rain, pleading: «Friends, buy papirosen!». Author Herman Yablokoff (Chaim Yablonik), a star of American Yiddish theater and an immigrant from Russia, introduced this tango in one of his radio programs in New York.⁴¹ Although the song came out in American publication in 1923, Yablokof created the lyrics ten years earlier in homeland.⁴² Travelling with different Yiddish texts among Eastern European Jewry, in 1920s *Papirosen* was identified with Odessa urban folklore and the tune of a pretty seller of bagels echoes *Papirosen*. Following the same melodic contour, a song crafted by Isaak Dunaevsky and performed by Odessite singer Leonid Utesov became a central piece of the first Soviet film musical, the still beloved tune *How many girls!* In the movie *Two Soldiers*, about World War II, the Odessite soldier sings about his city echoing this familiar melodic line.

The path of tango is also a story of diaspora, of twists and turns, *ochos*, and *volcados*. But to me, this is the story of migration and immigration, migrants and immigrants, ever seeking novelty, adventure, and equilibrium.

NOTE

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⁴¹ In 1947, along with a group of Yiddish performers, Yablokoff toured Displaced Persons camps and hospitals.

⁴² Cf. GILA FLAM, *Singing for Survival: Songs of the Lodz Ghetto, 1940-45*, Champaign, University of Illinois Press, 1992, p. 95. In Polish ghettos, this tango attained ever more chilling text, «Nishty kayn przydziel» [There are no coupons].