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ISA KREMER'S CITY

My beloved "black traitor", please read about the wonderful city you don't love. Yet you are yourself an incarnation of all its fun, devilment, and melancholy; and I did meet you under its acacias and lilacs and in rowed with you in the sea.

# Isa Kremer's City

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Isa Kremer  
Whose Native City, Odessa, Is Here So Charmingly Described in the Feuilleton by Vladimir Jabotinsky, Is One of the World's Greatest Balladists.

of the Euxine." A French exile, the Duke of Richelieu, was the city's first builder and governor. A swarm of Italian merchants, most of them brilliant smugglers, settled in the new town and gave it their language, their architecture, their love of music—and wealth. At the same time, an invasion of Greek traders and shippers connected the young harbor with every Godforsaken nook of the Anatolian shore, the Aegean Islands, Salonica and Smyrna. At the same time, the Jews dug a network of commercial drainage-ditches to convey the yield of all Ukraine's wheat chambers to Odessa and beyond. The background of the city was composed of the sixth and the youngest of those races: the South Russian (he only seldom, in those days, called himself an Ukrainian) manned the sailing boats, loaded and unloaded, laid stones for houses and sidewalks, and walked behind the oxen dragging the heavy wheat-wagon from the rapids of the Dnieper to the Quarantine—a matter, sometimes, of a thousand miles over crooked muddy roads.

hill overlooking the harbor there is a lordly house, known in my youth by the name of its ancient Polish owners, a name brimming with consonants—Brzosniowski. There the Polish conspiracy of 1863 was helped to hatch. And there, in Odessa, was established, since 1860, the main center of the Jewish renaissance movement: first, the headquarters of the *Haskalah*, later those of the Friends of Zion; Ahad Haam wrote his essays, Bialik his poems in Odessa. Nor did the Russian neglect Odessa in his striving for liberty. In the seventies, the city was the theater of several of the most spectacular terroristic acts ever credited or debited—to the famous executive committee of the *Narodovoltzi*; and early in this century, the rebel battleship *Potemkine*, by landing a crew in the Odessa harbor, first set in motion that unparalleled revolutionary convulsion which eventually made of Russia what she now seems to be.

## The Songs of Many Nations

Not only as a super-patriot but also as a detached reader of history, I do question whether there has ever been in the world another town so saturated with the hopes and enthusiasms of various nations—and incidentally with their songs. For the Italian, the Greek, the Polish, the Jewish, the Russian firebrand carried out half of his propaganda through the medium of a tune.

Isa Kremer has no rival in her own peculiar art of impersonating all these nations, and a few more; and if ever such a rival is born, she will have to come from Odessa—but she won't, for all that rainbow-glory is now a thing of the past, and Odessa has become a drab and sad barrack-room where everybody wears the same uniform outwardly and inwardly. It is a pity. That was a gay town, full of merry devilment; look at the imp in Isa Kremer's eyes when she sings that German jingle about the girl who doesn't like to go to the cloister, if you want to see a spark of that sly will-o'-the-wispy fun which was in the air of our city. Yet it also knew melancholy, that mild sadness familiar to merry peoples which never degenerates into despair—"which resembles sorrow only as the mist resembles the rain." I often wonder why Isa Kremer does not include in her repertoire the song of Choobchik—the name means "Little Lovelock"—who was a beloved and chivalrous bandit of some seventy years ago. It is just that mixture of melancholy and teasing dare-deviltry which was in the blood of those six and more peoples, all of them ~~hopeful~~

*oppressed and all of them hopeful.*

"Farewell, my town Odessa, goodbye my harbor dear: going to the island which they call 'Sibeer.' Yes, I killed your uncle; yes, I robbed your aunt: can you find the body and the loot? You can't! So let me have a bit of fun just this once again—knocking out the next cop's eye with my lovely chain.

Yet, perhaps, in speaking of six nations only I do an injustice to a dozen others. Two streets of Odessa were baptized "Arnaout"—it was the current name for Albanians. There was a suburb called *Moldavanka*; a Bulgarian Street, a Gypsy Street, a Polish Climb, an Armenian Alley, German, Turkish and Tartar settlements, a Carait "Kenasah," a Persian Bazaar. They all toiled to build Isa Kremer's city; and, while they toiled under that laughing sun, in that air spiced with the scents of sea and acacias and—and garlic, they sang.

## At Home in Every Language

Isa Kremer cannot help feeling at home in every language, cannot help yielding to the throb of every nation's tune. Odessa's tradition is an embroidery of many cultures. There was a time when even the street-tablets were printed in Italian beside Russian; the theater was Italian, the first newspaper French. Odessa had a crop of Italian and Greek poets—very minor poets, and long ago, but we remember it. Pushkin spent a few years of his stormy youth there, writing a masterpiece of which the best stanzas, I maintain, are those dedicated to Odessa. It was in a tavern of the Odessa harbor that a skipper's son, a boy called Giuseppe Garibaldi, met that *carbonaro* sailor who set him dreaming of a united Italy. There still is, in the neighborhood of the Greek market, a little house bearing the inscription in Greek over a marble plate: "*Oikia Marazli, en tede synedrisen he Ethnike Hetairia, 1821*"—the house where the "National Comradeship," responsible for the liberation of Greece, held its secret meetings. They stored their guns in the catacombs which, to this very day, wind for miles under the city's pavements, and where the Hellenic smuggler of a hundred years ago knew his way without any *Aradne's Thread*. On the edge of the

WHENEVER I listen to Isa Kremer's song I cannot help thinking of my native town—Odessa on the Black Sea shore. On that shore, under the acacias of Deribas Street, in the maple avenues of the Boulevard Nicholas, in the lilac bushes of the Alexander Park—a little also, perhaps, on the gigantic steps leading from Duke Richelieu's monument down to the harbor, steps where the barefooted longshoreman from below, hugging his kerchief-coiffed best girl, met the upper town dandy with his pretty demoiselle hurrying to the beach—there Isa Kremer was brought up; and I claim that no other spot on earth could have bred that particular temperament, that ear and throat and heart which feel at home in the songs of seven languages.

I am not quite sure whether it is quite lawful for a Zionist to be so madly patriotic about a city somewhere in the Diaspora—but that is how we all feel about Odessa, and those who don't are just black traitors. Once in London I heard a fellow townsman of mine coolly affirm that the number of Odessa's inhabitants was nine millions; he explained to me afterwards: "It's because London has eight; and if London had twenty, Odessa would have twenty-five; so there you are." I confess, in this connection, that our municipal reputation throughout all the Russias was that of bold and cheerful and resourceful liars, but we never minded it—did not Cyrano boast of his *gascons* as *menteurs sans vergogne*?

## Catherine Chose the Spot

Six peoples—at least—had combined their efforts to create that jewel of the universe. A clever German woman called Catherine the Great chose a spot on the shore, just between the mouths of the Dnieper and the Dniester, and said: "let it be the main port

I am by now a black traitor of my native town.