

# Crooked and Straight: Street Stories and Moral Stories in Early Soviet Odessa

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No city lives to such an extent by the street as Odessa. The street may change in appearance, but it never stops being the “nerve” of this big city of small shopkeepers and lumpens. The Civil War deprived the streets of its stores and courtesans. . . . Famine made the street howl. . . . NEP [the New Economic Policy] revived the peculiar aspect of the bourgeois street. But the street remained for Odessa its natural element. Each time, the street sang its song and developed it. This song was born unexpectedly. Someone hurled it out from the very depths and it was heartily picked up from the Moldavanka to Lanzheron beach.

—Iu. Zolotarev, “Ulitsa,” *Vechernie izvestiia*, May 14, 1923.

“Odessa-Mama.” . . . He decided to familiarize himself with the city. He glanced at *Izvestiia*, both morning and evening editions, he began to wander the streets. . . . Easy-going Odessa, this Manon Lescaut with a Jewish accent, could not stand the ascetic atmosphere of these dogmatic years. . . . And she answered the harshness of the new order with a good-natured little song, “It’s Terribly Noisy at Schneerson’s House.” This song testifies to the fantasies of Odessites, for everything had become quiet in Schneerson’s house, and across the city—quiet, respectable, and sad.”

—Il’ia Erenburg, *Rvach*, 1925.

Storytelling, to the point of mythmaking, invention, even fantasy, infringes on every attempt to tell the history of Odesa<sup>1</sup>—especially when “the street” is our focus, as it is here. We cannot escape the compelling narratives, vibrant characters, and imagined feelings with which Odesa has been imbued by this

I am grateful to the anonymous peer reviewers, Harriet Murav, Daniela Steila, the interdisciplinary Russian studies “Kruzhok” at the University of Illinois, and faculty and graduate students at Northwestern University’s Slavic Department for critical comments on earlier drafts of this article.

1. In this article, I transliterate Odesa as it was spelled at the time in the Russian-language sources that are my focus. I am aware of the Russocentric implications of this choice. On the other hand, the spelling “Odessa,” when writing about the Russian and Soviet city, usefully reminds us of the imperial condition that was a context for these stories.

*Slavic Review* 82, no. 2 (Summer 2023)

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rich narrative tradition.<sup>2</sup> In late imperial and early Soviet times, the Odessa story was crafted as much by its newspapers as by its literature—the two were always in dialogue. For journalists, telling a meaningful and gripping story was as important as superficial authenticity and factuality, especially when there was a message to convey. Especially in Soviet times, there was message of great importance—a story of revolutionary transformation. The epigraphs suggest something of the intertwined themes in the storytelling this article examines: Odessa as cosmopolitan “Mama” who accepted, even loved, those who lived differently, outside normativities, even outside the law; the street as tangible space and interpretive idea; past and present; sound and song; and emotions.

Unnamed but inescapable in these quotations, and the focus of this article, is moral storytelling. “Morality” became an obsession in the 1920s, as campaigns to “build communism” out of the wreckage and ambiguities of the NEP era gathered force. In this cultural revolution, “problems of everyday life” (*voprosy byta*), as Lev Trotskii famously called them, were a key political question. Campaigns were launched to eradicate what remained of the old and nurture the new (*novyi byt*). Political teleology and moral absolutism become ideological norms. Leaders of party and state at every level, from Moscow to Odessa, set loose a flood of speeches, articles, and books with titles like *Morality from the Marxist Point of View*, *How to Be a Communist*, *Old and New Morals*, and *Lenin on Morality*.<sup>3</sup> By the mid-1920s, as the compromises and contradictions of NEP gave way to efforts to mobilize society for rapid transformation, tolerance for difference, diversity, and contradiction was overwhelmed by revolutionary purpose.<sup>4</sup> What “anomalies” and “deviations” remained were to be crushed as “vestiges” (*perezhitki*) destined to die.<sup>5</sup> Or so the authorities repeatedly claimed.

2. The rich literature on the Odesa myth is familiar and does not need reiterating here. Key works by literary scholars and historians include Roshanna P. Sylvester, *Tales of Old Odessa: Crime and Civility in a City of Thieves* (DeKalb, 2005); Gregory Freidin, ed., *The Enigma of Isaac Babel: Biography, History, Context* (Stanford, 2009); Jarrod Tanny, *City of Rogues and Schnorrers: Russia's Jews and the Myth of Old Odessa* (Bloomington, 2011); Charles King, *Odessa: Genius and Death in a City of Dreams* (New York, 2011); Rebecca Jane Stanton, *Isaac Babel and the Self-Invention of Odessan Modernism* (Evanston, 2012); Viktor Savchenko, *Neofitsial'naia Odessa epokhi NEPa: Mart 1921-sentiabr' 1929* (Moscow, 2012); Efraim Sicher, *Babel' in Context: A Study in Cultural Identity* (Boston, 2012); Mirja Lecke, “The Street: A Spatial Paradigm in Odessan Literature,” *Slavonic and East European Review* 95, no. 3 (July 2017): 429–57; Efraim Sicher, “Isaac Babel's Odessa Tales: Inventing Lost Time and the Search for Cultural Identity,” *Russian Review* 77, no. 1 (January 2018): 65–87; Ilya Gerasimov, *Plebeian Modernity: Social Practices, Illegality, and the Urban Poor in Russia, 1906–1916* (Rochester, 2018).

3. For example, Anatolii Lunacharskii, *Moral' s marksistskoi tochki zreniia* (Khar'kov, 1925); E. M. Iaroslavskii, ed., *Kakim dolzhen byt' kommunist: Staraia i novaia moral'*, 2nd edition (Moscow, 1925); V. I. Lenin, *O morali*, ed. P. M. Tashkarov (Moscow, 1926).

4. A key study is David L. Hoffmann, *Cultivating the Masses: Modern State Practices and Soviet Socialism, 1914–1939* (Ithaca, 2011).

5. See, focused on Russian cities, Natal'ia Lebina, *Povsednevnaia zhizn' sovetskogo goroda: Normy i anomalii, 1920-1930 gody* (St. Petersburg, 1999), esp. 57–59, 62–63; Anne E. Gorsuch, *Youth in Revolutionary Russia: Enthusiasts, Bohemians, Delinquents* (Bloomington, 2000), 167–68; Elizabeth A. Wood, *Performing Justice: Agitation Trials in Early Soviet Russia* (Ithaca, 2005), 165–68.

Temporality, of course, was essential to this moral storytelling. Almost all revolutions, when narrating themselves, embrace teleological visions of positive transformation. Marxist revolutions do so especially, elaborating clear and confident narratives about the pathologies of the past overcome by the healthy new, about morality as the emancipated proletariat freeing itself from the bourgeois culture of the past, leaving behind the distorted mores and dark corners associated with the old way of life. Of course, this was a tale of desire as much as belief.

Soviet journalists were on the front lines of this moral storytelling and campaigning. They knew the message they were expected (and perhaps wanted) to convey: an unambiguous battle, in the building of socialism, between disorder and order, pathology and health, decadence and uplift, vice and morality. In a word: a story of old and new, of crooked and straight. They were supposed to know the correct definitions and not doubt the truths of these categories nor doubt the inevitable victory of the new life. This was especially important in such a famously, even mythically, transgressive and unruly city as Odessa.

But this straight moral story was often hard to sustain in the face of the facts on the streets, the complexity of lives lived, the improvised moral choices people made to get by, the “fugitive” (fleeting, volatile, perishable) quality of people’s lives and stories. Moral ambivalence and uncertainty, nostalgia for what was being properly eradicated, even uncertainty about how to distinguish “the crooked and the straight” (my metaphoric shorthand for the moral dualities pervading this discourse and campaigns) was as evident as clear binaries and unwavering teleologies. And, of course, there were the stories of actual “fugitives”: those who failed or refused to conform, who stood outside the law, and whose transgressions suggested crooked orientations toward powerful norms, toward the conditions of the present, and even toward the promises of the future—in Sara Ahmed’s sense of “orientations” as relations toward and perceptions of spaces and experiences, orientations that could be normatively straight but were often angled and crooked.<sup>6</sup> Waywardness on the street and narrative wandering off the straight path of moral and political storytelling is my focus here, for it reveals essential currents and undercurrents of those distinctive times and that distinctive place. To be sure, these deviations were more complex than terms like “resistance” recognize. These orientations were often less than “conscious,” especially in the way Soviet ideology understood consciousness. And they were often not at odds with sincere belief in the straight and normative path.

One more introductory word is needed: about the narrator whom I have placed center stage—the paradoxically well-known yet biographically mysterious feuilletonist for the city’s evening newspaper, Aleksandr Svetlov (at least, that was probably his actual name). He was eminent enough to make a cameo appearance in Isaac Babel’s story “Karl-Yankel” as “Sasha Svetlov, the feuilletonist of the *Odessa Izvestiia*.” And yet, we know little about him apart from his many essays and feuilletons for *Vechernie izvestiia* (The Evening

6. Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, 2006), esp. 1–24.

News) and, on occasion, for the weekly magazine *Shkval* (The Squall), both supplements to the *Izvestiia* of the Executive Committees of Odessa's Soviet of Workers' Deputies, Communist Party, and Council of Trade Unions.<sup>7</sup> He showed up in a few other places. In 1924, he was briefly a "special correspondent" for the national Soviet newspaper *Izvestiia* to report on the local trial of the accused murderers of the communist journalist Grigorii Malinovskii in a village near Odessa.<sup>8</sup> I suspect that he also wrote, as many journalists did, with more than one pseudonym: along with his main nom-de-plume, "Al. Svetlov," judging by topics, style, and the coded names, he may also have signed columns as "Al. Iuzhnyi" and "Alpas."<sup>9</sup> In later years, he contributed the occasional essay about Odessa to the satirical national magazine, *Krokodil*.<sup>10</sup> And later still, during World War II, an "A. Svetlov" appears as coauthor of a couple of books with Efim Vesenin (whose real name may have been Feigin), who had also been a feuilletonist for *Izvestiia* in Odessa before moving to Moscow in 1930 and also then writing for *Krokodil* (it is even plausible in this mysterious authorial fog that they were the same person).<sup>11</sup>

The lack of clarity about Svetlov as a "real" person is apt. It speaks of something very real and important: the fragile and fluid boundaries in storytelling between authors and their stories, especially stories of the streets. In more ways than one, he was a proper urban mystery: a classic "stranger," a "man of the crowd," in whose story fiction and fact intertwine. My focus on a single narrator is also a reminder of particularity. We cannot homogenize

7. Evening newspapers, in Soviet times as before, tended to focus more on everyday life, hence my particular attention to this source. *Vechnie izvestiia*—the full name of which was initially *Izvestiia Odesskogo Gubispolkoma, Gubkoma KP(b)U i Gubprofsoveta (Vechnii vypusk)*—was published from 1923 until 1930 as the evening edition of the city's primary state and party paper. *Shkval*, the magazine supplement of *Izvestiia*, was published 1924–33, only in Ukrainian after 1929.

8. *Izvestiia*, October 17, 1924, 5; October 19, 1924, 3; October 21, 1924, 3; October 22, 1924, 6; November 19, 1924, 5; November 23, 1924, 4.

9. I have not found Svetlov in any histories of journalism or in reference books. He is not listed in the primary guide to Russian writers' pseudonyms, I. F. Masanov, *Slovar' psevdonimov russkikh pisatelei, uchenykh i obshchestvennykh deiatelei*, 4 vols. (Moscow, 1957–1960). The supplement *Shkval*, no. 1 (September 1924), 8–9 identifies him as their "special correspondent" and gives his first name as Aleksandr. His first name also appears in *Vechnie izvestiia*, February 8, 1924, 2. I deduce that the columns by Al. Iuzhnyi (Al the Southerner) were his work: the byline is suggestive as is the use of a column title—*Na temy dnia* (Themes of the day)—that Svetlov often used as well as the two-part structure of the columns. I find the subjects, interpretive approach, tone, and style to be very much alike. At the end of 1929, this column title is briefly taken up by Nina Mil', who also writes about the struggle between the old everyday mores and the new. A handwritten note in the November 12, 1927 issue of *Vechnie izvestiia* held in the Odessa State Library indicates that the columnist occasionally signing his name as "Alpas" was Svetlov. This is less certain, but plausible in style, and we might speculate this it was a pseudonym constructed of parts of Svetlov's name, including a plausible patronymic: Aleksander Pavlovich Svetlov—hence another possible pseudonym for the author of articles on similar themes, "Al. Pavlovich."

10. For example, Al. Svetlov, "Krematorii," *Krokodil*, February 1930, 11.

11. See *Wikipedia*, "Vesenin, Efim Mironovich," last modified July 3, 2023, at [https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Весенин,\\_Ефим\\_Миронович](https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Весенин,_Ефим_Миронович) (accessed November 8, 2022). I am gratefully to Nina Gourianova for pointing me toward this connection.

the Soviet urban experience and Soviet subjectivities, least of all for Odessa in the 1920s. Individual stories are telling of things larger than themselves. But they are not only exemplary of generalizations—they are evidence also of the rich variety of experience and belief, of the presence and persistence of difference.

### Street Stories, Straight Stories

“The street” is the physical, conceptual, and moral center of these stories. Globally, writers, sociologists, historians, and journalists have viewed the street as exemplifying the urban, as the city’s most signifying synecdoche. As such, the street is an interpretive as well as material space. Michel de Certeau argued that the street vividly illustrates how “place” becomes “space,” how the stable and regularized *place* of planners and builders is remade as an uncertain and unstable *space* by those who inhabit and use the street. As so many have observed, from architectural historians to poets, the street is a dynamic space of ordering power and disordered spontaneity, oppression and imagination, conformity and self-realization, display and disguise, desire and danger.<sup>12</sup> The archetypal figure, of course, is the strolling *flâneur*, “intoxicated” by the “voluptuous” flux of urban life, feeling on the street an endlessly ambivalent mixture of daring and uncertainty, pleasure and estrangement. And the journalist (along with the police detective), Walter Benjamin observed, were models for the *flâneur*.<sup>13</sup>

Street corners condense and magnify “the street,” continually appearing as a leitmotif in urban histories and stories, not least in Odessa.<sup>14</sup> As the bent open space of the intersection, corners are places to watch and be watched, to gather at or pass through. Sometimes, corner life is deviant and wayward (moral terms built with images of movement). Thieves worked corners and disappeared around them. *Flâneurs* loved the movement and visuality at corners. Prostitutes considered corners their domain. So did the police, for it was precisely here that orderly linearity and normativity were most threatened. Corners are also narrowed angles where structures meet, where one might be

12. Spiro Kostof, *The City Assembled: The Elements of Urban Form Through History* (London, 1992); Zeynep Çelik, Diane Favro, and Richard Ingersoll, eds., *Streets: Critical Perspectives on Public Space* (Berkeley, 1994); Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley, 1984); Judith Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (London, 1992); Elizabeth Wilson, *The Sphinx in the City: Urban Life, the Control of Disorder, and Women* (Los Angeles, 1992); Mark D. Steinberg, *St. Petersburg Fin de Siècle* (New Haven, 2011). Conceptually attentive to the street as a key space in post-Soviet Odesa are Tanya Richardson, *Kaleidoscopic Odessa: History and Place in Contemporary Ukraine* (Toronto, 2008) and Caroline Humphrey and Vera Skvirskaja, eds., *Post-Cosmopolitan Cities: Explorations of Urban Coexistence* (New York, 2012), chaps. 1–3.

13. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, Mass., 1999), 83, 103, 416–20, 425, 431, 429, 435, 441–2, 444, 446, 518–19, 901, 905; idem., *Einbahnstrasse* (Berlin, 1928).

14. For influential studies, see William Foote Whyte, *Street Corner Society: The Social Structure of an Italian Slum* (Chicago, 1943); Elliott Liebow, *Tally’s Corner: A Study of Negro Streetcorner Men* (Boston, 1967); Svati Pragna Shah, *Street Corner Secrets: Sex, Work, and Migration in the City of Mumbai* (Durham, 2014).

cornered and trapped. Corners (and the word works in these multiple ways in Russian and Ukrainian as in English) are also inside spaces where dirt and dust gather, where the illicit and the unclean linger, where people and things hide in the shadows—materially and metaphorically. In early Soviet spatial and moral thinking, “corners . . . where the sun never shines and it is hard to breathe” were to be uncovered, cleansed, and opened to light and air.<sup>15</sup> “Culture corners,” “Lenin Corners,” “Red Corners” were the dialectical answers to the dust, dirt, and darkness of corners harboring old ways and values.

“Al. Svetlov” was an exemplar of reporting from street and corner, an “urban prowler,” in the global manner of the city explorer who felt entitled to enter any space he desired, to gaze, explain, and judge, seeking and claiming knowledge of the most shadowy corners—an entitlement and gaze that was shaped by class and gender, and echoed colonial and imperial modes of seeing and knowing.<sup>16</sup> Unlike the idle flâneur, of course, the journalist (and the detective) was paid to enter hidden and dark spaces to produce usable knowledge, and legitimated by authoritative institutions. Svetlov’s narrative orientation was the feuilleton, a genre with a rich history in the Russian empire, attracting many influential authors. Contributors to *Vecherka*, as everyone called the tabloid *Evening News*, in celebration of its one thousandth issue, reflected on the feuilleton as the defining genre of the evening paper. A more flavorful and “complex dish” than the “lead essay” (*peredovaia*) of the morning paper, “this dish requires many spices and herbs: it needs to be peppered with anecdotes . . . , stirred with irony, and sometimes even sweetened with a little bit of lyricism.” They pushed back against the accusation that this made *Vecherka* like the old prerevolutionary “boulevard” tabloids. The debased cultural tastes and mentality of the boulevard have no place in Soviet society, they insisted. On the other hand, to be called a “street paper”—well, “that is almost a compliment.”<sup>17</sup> Svetlov was a street reporter above all.

But as a Soviet street journalist, Svetlov offered straight talk about everyday life—frank and blunt, but embracing the Soviet teleology of the revolution marching forward, overcoming the harmful heritage of the bourgeois past. If the archetypal flâneur, as urban prowler, was famously said to have gone “botanizing on the asphalt” (practicing epistemological mastery of all he saw), Soviet journalists like Svetlov went “moralizing on the asphalt” with a morality cast in politics.<sup>18</sup> His stance was often that of righteous indignation. In 1926, for example, he devoted one of his “people and mores” (*liudi i nray*) feuilletons in *Shkval* to uncovering a disturbing fact hiding in plain sight in the very center of the city. “All of Odessa knows Petrov’s ice cream [*morozhenoe*], his kiosk in the City Garden,” Svetlov began. “But not many know ‘Uncle’ Petrov and his ice cold [*zamorozhenoe*] heart.” Taking the reader

15. Andrei Sobol’, “Narodnyi sud,” *Sud idet* (Supplement to the journal *Rabochii Sud*), no. 13–14 (1925), 747.

16. For one of the most influential works in a vast literature, see Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight*, esp. 15–39.

17. Virazh, “Na poliakh lista gazetnogo (‘Vecherniaia’ filosofia),” *Vechernie izvestiia*, September 12, 1926, 2.

18. Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 416–55.

to Petrov's workshop on a small street at the edge of town, he showed, with more than a touch of melodrama, the exploited "girls and boys" who worked for "Uncle" Petrov. "Petrov's ice cream is sweet, even too sweet. . . . But his soul is bitter and wormwood." He "sweet talks" the young girls in his employ and then "ruins" them. He warns them that if they tell, he will fire them. Eventually, one fourteen-year old girl could no longer bear the abuse. Doctors confirmed her claim that she had been raped.<sup>19</sup>

The narrative frame that Svetlov, like many other writers, used to give proper political form to these moral stories was the teleological binary of "the old and the new"—making visible the "vestiges" of the decaying old hiding in the dark corners of everyday life and heralding the signs of the healthy new. The sharpness of these binaries—social, spatial, temporal, moral—was meant not to be missed. Typical was a 1924 story in *Vechernie izvestiia* that altered the classic moral binary of daytime and nighttime in the city. Daytime: In the factories of Peresyp and the Moldavanka (the two major working-class neighborhoods in the city, Peresyp predominantly Russian and Ukrainian and the Moldavanka mainly Jewish), from noon until the sirens blow at four, the "mezzosoprano of forged steel . . . blends with the tenor of drive belts. . . . From 12:00 to 4:00 p.m. workers toughen their calluses and toughen their building of the USSR. And live proudly: by labor and for labor." Even after dusk and into the night, there are workers' clubs (where "smoke-stained hands tenderly turn the pages of Lenin's works and eyes shine at every word"), theaters (with stories of revolution that "never get old"), and night schools, where men and women whose backs are strong and whose hands are more accustomed to tools work to overcome their own illiteracy. But there is another city during these same hours: "From 12:00 to 4:00 p.m. there is another life, other people." They are not in workers' districts but on "the Boulevard" overlooking the sea at the top of the city's famous stairway. Here people are defined by leisure not labor, and yet are not even enjoying the healthy Odessa climate shaped by sea and sun. For these debased types, especially the women, "there is no spring. There are only dazzling shoes and dresses as cynical as crass anecdotes, and motley and confused manteaus. There are only conversations as tedious as a barrel organ [*sharmanka*], as boring as a funeral dirge." And after dark, the talk becomes "more cold and more tasteless."<sup>20</sup>

In another "people and mores" feuilleton, he further explored city nights on the working-class margins of the city. He hammered on the distinctions between past and future, between the dying old and the rising new. The old: "Remote [*glukhie*] and gloomy ruins. Dark back alleys [*pereulochki*]. The promiscuous hand of street fighting. Old-school values [*po zakonu*]." The new: "A workers' club. The first ray of light—a real urban cinema. The human being, and especially women, on a new path out of all this." The old: when a woman, whose husband abandoned her and their child, decides to go to the club, her "old-school" father calls her a "prostitute, a streetwalker [*ulichnaia*]," for

19. Al. Svetlov, "Liudi i nray: Sakharnoe morozhenoe 'diadi' Petrova," *Shkval*, no. 28 (60) (July 17, 1926), 7.

20. Al. Svetlov, "Sezonnye ocherki: Ot 12 do 4, ot 6 i pozhe," *Vechernie izvestiia*, May 17, 1924, 3.

decent women don't go to clubs, and he beats her so violently that "any hooligan would envy" his blows. Almost as bad: the neighbors agree that he is right. The new: she refuses to give up. In time, "the new tramples the old ways under foot."<sup>21</sup> Writing about the trial of the madam of a famous Odessa brothel popular among the city's elites, whose inmates described life there as "carousing, binging, and refined debauchery" (*kutezhi, popoiki i utochennyi razvrat*), Svetlov expressed satisfaction not only that this Madame Guillot (*Madam Gil'o*) was finally being punished, but that people have turned away "in disgust from such a monster [*uroda*] of debauchery."<sup>22</sup>

If disgust means turning away—and the Russian word, *otvrashchenie*, means that literally—Svetlov turned *toward* signs of the "new life," especially in the city's many new "culture corners" (*kul'turnye ugolki*): "Red Corners," "Lenin corners," literacy corners (*ugolki likbeza*), "worker-correspondent corners," and other "culture corners" where people left the streets to improve themselves after a long day of labor; parks and gardens as "culture corners" that offered citizens sports, music, theater, concerts, and films; the street celebrations in the Moldavanka and Peresyp of International Women's Day, International Workers' Day, and the anniversary of the Bolshevik revolution; even prisons as places correction not punishment, evident, not least, in the establishment of prison "culture corners."<sup>23</sup>

Svetlov knew his political task and it is entirely plausible that he believed in this mission. The "Sasha Svetlov, feuilletonist for the *Odessa News*" who appeared in Babel's 1931 story certainly embraced this mission, with gusto. From the press box at a big public trial of a Jewish *mohel* and a woman who secretly took her grandson to him for ritual circumcision, held in one of the city's biggest factories—"performing justice," of course, was as important as enacting it<sup>24</sup>—this Svetlov sends a note to the prosecutor, who was trying to crush the *mohel* with earnest and outraged questions and declarations, which the *mohel* parried with such sly wit that the courtroom erupted with a "cannonade" of sympathetic laughter. "You are a dolt [*baran*], Syoma," Svetlov's note tells him, "destroy him with irony, the funny alone will kill. Yours, Sasha."<sup>25</sup> Babel's Sasha Svetlov understands the orientation of the feuilleton: to win its audience with "spices and herbs" and peppery anecdotes, all "stirred with irony." For Soviet writers, the feuilleton was put in service to the crusading state. But Babel's fictional Svetlov is missing the

21. Al. Svetlov, "Liudi i nrvay: Otets, Machekha . . .," *Shkval*, no. 44 (76) (November 6, 1926), 11–12.

22. Al. Svetlov, "Grimasy proshlogo (sudu nad 'Madam Gil'o')," *Vechernie izvestiia*, February 15, 1924, 2; G. B. "Sud: Delo 'Madam Gil'o,'" *Vechernie izvestiia*, February 16, 1924, 3; "Sud: Delo Gil'o v verkhovnom sude," *Vechernie izvestiia*, July 5, 1924, 3.

23. *Vechernie izvestiia*, July 4, 1924, 3; January 16, 1925, 2; February 10, 1925, 3; January 16, 1925, 2; March 8, 1926, 2; May 3, 1927, 2; November 9, 1927, 3; December 21, 1928, 3; May 15, 1927, 3; November 6, 1928, 3; November 9, 1928, 3.

24. See Wood, *Performing Justice*.

25. Isaak Babel, "Karl-Iankel'" (first published *Zvezda*, no. 7 [1931]), in his *Odesskie rasskazy*, ed. I. N. Sukhikh, Azbuka-klassika series (St. Petersburg, 2016), 77–78. I am grateful to the peer reviewer for *Slavic Review* who reminded me of this appearance of Svetlov.



ambivalence about mercilessly destroying every remnant of the old that we hear from the living Svetlov.

### Angled into Ambiguity

Svetlov once described his journalistic orientation as “*pod uglom*,” literally “under the corner,” meaning at an angle, oblique, tilted, acute.<sup>26</sup> This was a visual orientation. In fact, when he introduced the term, it was to describe his excursion into the city’s corners with a camera: “With a ‘Kodak’ over my shoulder, I look *pod uglom* at the city, at its streets, at its workers’ districts on the edge.” It was also a skewed vision, focused, in this adventure, on drunks and the “miraculous places” they drank (with a drinking pun about angles, as alcohol content in Russian is measured in degrees).<sup>27</sup> Again, we can elaborate the point in Ahmed’s terms: *pod uglom* as a spatial and experiential orientation toward spaces, objects, and people that, especially in relation to normative direction, was queerly angled, askew, astray. As prowler, botanizer, and moralizer on the asphalt, seeking out the “people and mores” of the city, Svetlov often stood slant-wise to authoritative moral binaries and political teleologies, possibly counter to his own intentions. There is no reason to doubt the sincerity of his belief in the Soviet project, his embrace of its cleansing and improving moral mission. But at the everyday intimate scale at which he worked, moral clarity could be elusive. On the street, close to people’s lives, simple binaries were often unsettled by ambivalent feelings and uncertain convictions, by an orientation that was both straight and crooked, normative and queer.

Also, Svetlov was a storyteller. Good stories, he seemed to understand, refrain from easy interpretation and judgment, especially in judging people. As Walter Benjamin would argue in his 1936 essay on Nikolai Leskov, the power of good storytelling is its avoidance of too much “explanation,” its offering not the “moral of the story” but the “meaning of life” in all its complexity and “perplexity.”<sup>28</sup> Svetlov was not exceptional. Reading the many newspaper and magazine stories of urban disorder and deviance through the 1920s—stories ranging from hooliganism to bootlegging, from prostitution to violent gangsterism—what is significant is not just the persistence of deviance, which was clearly a frustrating reality but easily framed as a remnant of the dying old, but the persistent ambivalence in how these stories were told.

Consider, for example, stories about the Moldavanka, the heavily Jewish neighborhood sprawling along the city’s edge, legendary, not least because of Babel’s “Odessa Stories,” for its “bandits” and “gangsters” as well as its Jewish workers.<sup>29</sup> This urban margin had become a type of center by the

26. A. Svetlov, “Pod uglom,” *Shkval*, no. 28 (October 1925), 15.

27. *Ibid.*

28. Walter Benjamin, “The Storyteller: Observations on the Works of Nikolai Leskov” (1936), in *Selected Writings*, ed. Michael Jennings et. al., 4 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 1996–2003), 3:143–66, esp. 147–48, 155.

29. At least 80 percent of the residents of the Moldavanka in the 1920s were Jews, based on the number reporting Yiddish as their mother tongue. See Savchenko, *Neofitsial'naiia Odessa*, 12, 14–16.

1920s. According to the Odesa historian Viktor Savchenko, the Moldavanka “defined the fashions,” “jargon,” “mores” (*nrvy*), and “soul” of the city during the 1920s. It had “ceased to be simply the name of a district. It formed a style of living, it became a particular institution of everyday life.” And if every district in early Soviet Odessa “had its particular mentality,” the ethos of the Moldavanka was to be “not especially virtuous” (*ne ochen' pravednaia*), even to form something of a “latent counterculture.”<sup>30</sup>

A couple of weeks after the publication in the daytime *Izvestiia* of what would become Isaac Babel’s most iconic Odessa story, “Kak eto delalos’ v Odesse” (How Things Were Done in Odessa),<sup>31</sup> the evening edition featured a set of journalistic essays, feuilletons, and a poem about the Moldavanka.<sup>32</sup> Throughout these texts, as in Babel’s story, past and present are the essential narrative frame. One sketch, “Moldavanka Corners,” recalled the old Haymarket Square as once the worst “corner of the Moldavanka,” a noisy and dirty place where “profanity was as heavy as leaden clouds carried through thick air saturated with the smell of bad food.” But now, “the Revolution has ventilated it with its refreshing spirit.” Now, after work, Moldavankans go to clubs and libraries rather than to the old unhealthy “corners,” which are all “dying out.”<sup>33</sup> Svetlov’s contribution viewed “the most characteristic, most ‘Moldavankan’ street in the Moldavanka,” Glukhaia Street (renamed Zaporozhskaia Street in 1904, but still known by its old name). “Here lived the kings of the Moldavanka.” On Glukhaia, “the key to life was to be drunk and debauched, day and night.” In the old days, this corner of the Moldavanka was “always intoxicatingly noisy” (*p’iano kriklivaia*). But now, in 1923, “it has truly become a *glukhaia* street [silent and deaf, a backwater, a dead-end, empty, unclean, forsaken], dying and already dead.” Most famously, everyone knew, so Svetlov did not need to say, the bandit “king” known as Mishka Iaponchik, the model for Babel’s Benya Krik, was born on Glukhaia Street in 1891.<sup>34</sup> Where once this street was filled with gangsters, Svetlov recalled, now one saw only a toothless old woman, collapsed ceilings, and a few homeless idlers, “dirty and barefoot, awaiting twilight or the darkness of night.” One of these old idlers “tells it simply and tersely: ‘Now, you see, it’s all dead and gone.’ And he shuddered.”<sup>35</sup>

The narrative of revolutionary progress, the intended message, was somehow infused with melancholy hints of loss. Perhaps Svetlov and other journalists were tripped up by their desire to tell a good story, to enliven the telling in the style of an evening paper, “peppered with anecdotes” and “sweetened with a little bit of lyricism.” Perhaps they understood that “real storytelling,”

30. Savchenko, *Neofitsial'naiia Odessa*, 14–16.

31. Isaak Babel, “Kak eto delalos’ v Odesse,” *Izvestiia Odesskogo Gubispolkoma*, May 5, 1923.

32. *Vechernie izvestiia*, May 26, 1923, 3–4.

33. Iulii Kh., “Ugolki Moldavanki: ‘Kosarka,’” *Vechernie izvestiia*, May 26, 1923, 4.

34. Viktor Savchenko, “Mishka Iaponchik—‘korol’ odeskkikh banditov,” in his *Avantiuristy grazhdanskoi voiny: Istoricheskoe rassledovanie, Zhizn' znamenitykh liudei: ZhZL series* (Moscow, 2000), chap. 5 at <https://biography.wikireading.ru/amp91420> (accessed July 25, 2023).

35. A. Svet[lov], “Kuski Moldavanki,” *Vechernie izvestiia*, May 26, 1923, 3.

in Benjamin's sense, cannot be closed down interpretively. Perhaps, like Babel and Ehrenburg, these melancholy notes reflected feelings that something vital was being lost in all this serious and orderly quiet.

As we can see, interpretation was sometimes expressed through sensory storytelling. The senses, scholars have argued, are a mode of perception and expression where the material and the moral, experience and judgment, are entangled.<sup>36</sup> Svetlov and other writers often evoked the sights, sounds, and smells of the city, especially in the Moldavanka. Often, the narrated sensory landscape conveyed an intimation of romance and a sensibility of loss. It is not by chance that Ehrenburg, in the 1925 novel quoted in the epigraph, highlighted the song, "It is Terribly Noisy at Schneerson's House," usually dubbed "Schneerson's Wedding" (*Svadba Shneersona*), a popular song in the 1920s about a lavish and raucous wedding in the Moldavanka district. The fact that "everything had become quiet in Schneerson's house, and across the city—quiet, respectable, and sad,"<sup>37</sup> fit well with so many other street stories where noise and silence expressed social, political, and moral conditions and change. In a 1925 essay in *Shkval*, for example, Moisei Zats reflected on the late-day atmosphere in the Moldavanka at almost any streetcorner:

Evenings on the corner, under little green trees (the old ones were all cut down in 1919), a squeeze-box [*garmoshka*] and a balalaika ring out, some fellows do an African tap dance [*chechotku*] to these sounds, while some girls wail and heave [*vizhat i podtiagivaiut*] a song: "I know how to thrash / And how to get cash / I know how to deceive / And I know how to thief."<sup>38</sup>

Immediately, almost apologetically, Zats insisted that this was not what he wanted to write about. Rather, he *wanted* to tell about "the new, awakened Moldavanka," about sounds from a construction workers' club instead of "drunken voices ringing from a tavern," about a clean and bright place where men and women gather after work to "play dominoes and checkers, to read the papers and magazines," to discuss how to end unemployment. Walking into one of the most abysmal and forsaken ("*glukhoe*" again) corners of the city, the Balka section of the Moldavanka—around Balkovskaia Street, an area said to have been a favorite for "bandits"<sup>39</sup>—Zats recalled that only a few years earlier, "life in Balka was noisy and unruly. They made moonshine in every little house. Every evening people emerged from the many gangsters' dens [*maliny naletchikov*] to 'go to work,' so that by night they could again get drunk and carouse." But "the militia has cleaned up Balka," and now one sees and hears only carters and old ladies making bricks.<sup>40</sup>

36. See Lecke, "The Street." On sensory history, see Aimée Boutin, "How to Do Urban Sensory History," *Journal of Urban History* 45, no. 2 (March 2019): 409–15.

37. Il'ia Ehrenburg, "Rvach" (1925), in his *Sobranie sochinenii*, 9 vols. (Moscow, 1964–67), 2:179–80.

38. "Я умею молотить / Умею подмолачивать / Умею шарики крутить / Карманы выворачивать." From one of many variants of the famous Jewish street song "Limonchiki." See the forthcoming dissertation by Elizabeth Abosch on the history of Soviet urban song cultures, especially the persistence and response to "harmful" songs.

39. "Moldavanka," *Vechernie izvestiia*, May 26, 1923, 3.

40. M. Zats, "Moldavanka," *Shkval*, no. 18 (May 1925), 13.

The need to keep repeating this story about the death of the past and the healthy march of the new—if only as a concluding moral—can obviously be read against the grain as evidence of what every Odessan knew: the brawling, thieving, drinking, noisy, and boasting old Moldavanka was not dead. It was being strangled and silenced, but it was still breathing, even singing. More telling, and worrisome, though, than this story of persistence is that these writers, Svetlov among them, often told this story against the grain of their own arguments about positive progress, recalling what was disappearing with ambivalent tones, implicitly suggesting that something vital was dying. Moral and political clarity was the expected norm for public discourse about past and present, about the crooked and the straight. But insisting did not make it so.

### **“Corner Types”: Street Children and other Heroes of Modern Life**

Svetlov was fascinated by people who felt at home on the street: street singers, beggars, drunks, and street children. The tensions and ambiguities in orienting himself morally and ideologically in the street were especially evident in his many stories about “street children” (*deti ulitsy*), known officially as *bezprizorniki* (*bezprytul’ni* in Ukrainian), meaning unsupervised, abandoned, homeless children. They were among the most characteristic creatures of the Soviet street in the 1920s, the consequence of social disruptions caused by war, revolution, civil war, occupation, famine, disease, and the sluggish process of rebuilding—which were all particularly devastating in Ukraine. Their numbers in Odessa were especially high, contemporaries said, because of the natural attractiveness of this southern seaport for those who lived on the streets.<sup>41</sup> Newspaper stories about street children were marked—until the more impatient and demanding late 1920s—by pathos and pity, optimism about the redeemability of individuals victimized and deformed by social conditions, and confidence that Soviet society would allow these children new lives away from the degrading world of the street.<sup>42</sup>

41. There is a very large literature on Soviet approaches to childhood and homeless children in particular. The foundational study is Alan M. Ball, *And Now My Soul Is Hardened: Abandoned Children in Soviet Russia, 1918–1930* (Berkeley, 1994). Since, there has been very important work by Catriona Kelly, Lisa A. Kirschenbaum, Dorena Caroli, Maria Galmarini, and Andy Byford. Concerning Odessa, the key work-in-progress is Matthew Pauly, *City of Children: Juvenile Poverty, Crime, and Salvation in Odesa, 1892–1941*. See his recent article, “Curative Mythmaking: Children’s Bodies, Medical Knowledge, and the Frontier of Health in Early Soviet Odesa,” *East/West: Journal of Ukrainian Studies*, Odesa’s Many Frontiers 9, no. 2 (2022): 145–83, and the unpublished talk presented at the ASEES Annual Meeting in Chicago, November 12, 2022, “Iron Discipline for Petty Offenders! Juvenile Crime and Public Order in Early Soviet Odesa (Odessa).” *Vechernie izvestiia* regularly featured articles surveying this continuing problem through the 1920s.

42. For example, Al. Pavlovich (another possible pseudonym for Svetlov), “Deti ulitsy,” *Vechernie izvestiia*, April 16, 1926, 2; L. Borev, “Kommuna bezprizornykh,” *Vechernie izvestiia*, October 9, 1926, 2; “Zashchitite ikh ot ulitsy,” *Vechernie izvestiia*, October 17, 1926, 1.

Svetlov appreciated the positive efforts of the Soviet state to create institutions to help Odessa's street children. But his essays also told another story: less the optimistic and teleological narrative about "yesterday's 'street children'" living happily in Soviet boarding schools (*internaty*), where they were cleaned, cared for, and taught a trade, than ambiguous stories about the exceptions, about children who refused this straightening help—"deserters" who felt most at home living in the city's corners and prowling its streets, who loved the vitality of the public square and valued their own freedom. In one of his many columns about street children, Svetlov reported that they had been "christened by the public square itself as 'corner-types' [*uglovye*]," for their spirit was that of the corner: they love the "clamor and idleness" of the street, they "love to smoke, swear, and spit" while hanging around their corners. Not least, they embraced the culture of the street and the streetcorner as good, declaring everyone else, in a sly appropriation of Soviet discourse, to be "bourgeois."<sup>43</sup> We might see these "corner types" as a plebeian and juvenile variant of Baudelaire's "heroes of modern life" who found "home" in the world of the street, indeed precisely in the disruptions of urban modernity that gave them space and freedom.<sup>44</sup>

Svetlov wrote, for instance, of the teenaged street singer Iudka Prokopets, known as "Iudka Divertissement," whose "homeland is the street." The children's homes all know him, because he escaped from each one several times. "Off the street there is no life for Iudka, no joy." In America, Svetlov speculated, he would be a "ragged king," for "Iudka loves dirt and is used to wearing rags." But, above all, Iudka sings. He sings early in the morning in the "depths of the Moldavanka." At night, he sings on Lassalle Street, the former Deribasovskaia, known for its cafés, bars, and promenading. And when Iudka sings, with his gravelly voice like "a binging drunk," everyone stops to listen: "the cabby, the cigarette boy, the bagel lady [*baba s bublikami*], the city gawker [*gorodskoi rotozei*], the unemployed 'Nepman.'" He makes little from his efforts: some coins, a free bagel, some cigarettes. But the main thing, Iudka tells Svetlov, is that he gets by and is not a "bourgeois"—appropriating Soviet language and values, but also mangling the term as "*brazhui*," or, rather, making it his own. He is particular but practical about what songs he will sing. The Soviet songs he learned in the children's home, such as the "Internationale," are "no good for making money." Of course, one song he did regularly sing was "Schneerson's Wedding."

Svetlov understood what this story required interpretively: a moral about the superiority and inevitability of the new. So, he offered this conclusion to his tale: "we must uproot these homeless children from the cruel clutches of the street."<sup>45</sup> The trouble with this tacked-on moral is that it could not rewrite the more ambiguous and open storytelling of the whole, the counter-currents

43. A. Svetlov, "Ulitsa v portretakh: Uglovye (Natura)," *Vechernie izvestiia*, November 22, 1923, 2.

44. Charles Baudelaire, "The Painter of Modern Life" (1863) in *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, ed., trans. Jonathan Mayne (London, 1995), 9.

45. Al. Svetlov, "Ocherki byta: 'Iudka Devertissement' (Syn kvartala)," *Vechernie izvestiia*, February 13, 1924, 2.

in Svetlov's own storytelling: his love for street stories and people, even when this was at odds with simple moralizing and ideological clarity.

Svetlov's prowls took him to what he called "underground Odessa." In part, this underground was physically beneath the city's surface: Odessa's famous "catacombs," the network of half-ruined tunnels and corridors beneath the city's streets that were said to go back to the time when the city was a Turkish fortress town and then became a smugglers' haven. The Turks and the smugglers are gone, but "underground Odessa is still there." He entered, led by a guide, through a grate at the corner of Deribasovskaia near Palais Royale Square, down a forgotten pit "filled with trash, filth, and horse shit," and into the "labyrinth" where he found, in a dimly lit corner, some of the children who lived there. He learned that they survived by stealing and prostitution, but also that they considered such a life normal and right. On leaving, Svetlov asked one of them why they don't live in a children's home. The boy laughed: why would we want to live in such an "alien and unneeded" place? Again, Svetlov finished with a proper Soviet moral: "All the same, in this underground Odessa people of the future are growing up. Perhaps today they are 'nobodies.' But they will come out of here someday and somewhere: into the street and then into life. And if we don't make them our own, what will they become?" Yet again, the style and tone of his account expressed sympathy for these children and even for their defiant morality—or, at least, they made a good story.<sup>46</sup>

Svetlov also prowled the city's above-ground "underworld": the "bars," "grottos," and "dens," which for the young were a crooked counterworld to schools and children's homes. Again, these "corner types" told Svetlov of an underground moral code that could be a crooked echo of Soviet language and values. Consider, for example, a girl he met in a tavern, whom he called green-eyes (*zelenye glaza*). She was no more than twelve years of age, he thought, and probably younger. Standing beside a piano, she was thin and looked hungry. Svetlov began talking with her. The girl suggested that Svetlov might "need" her. "For what?" he asked. "I know how to tell fortunes and how to make conversation if you are bored." He inferred, connecting the word for fortune-telling (*gadanie*) and the word meaning something vile and disgusting (*gadost'*), that she was offering more than conversation. This became explicit as they talked. She told him of her knowledge of what men want from women (nothing good) and what women want from men (true passion). He bought her a meal, for she was clearly hungry, after which she complained when he refused to take what she was offering: "Citizen, are you insulting me, treating me as no good? . . . I don't want to eat for nothing. I know that's not good, it's 'bourgeois' [*burzhuinost'*]." As for what she did to get by, that is not "filthy" (*gadost'*), she insisted. "It's work, it's my job, citizen." Again, Svetlov concluded his story, which was inescapably sympathetic, at best ambivalent, with an attempt at a clear moral, though more lyrical than lecturing, if fully clichéd: "It was now day, bright and tender. We were in Peresyp, and in the factories, where the

46. Al. Svetlov, "Podzemnaia Odessa (ocherki)," *Vechernie izvestiia*, September 19, 1924, 2.

factory schools [*fabzavuch*] were forged, the sirens screamed: ‘About the new person, about the new life.’”<sup>47</sup>

Toward the end of the 1920s, Svetlov’s name appeared less and less often in the pages of the *Evening News*. Many of his last columns, often under the new pseudonym “Al. Iuzhnyi,” were complaints about the small but troubling moral failures of Odessa’s state institutions and ordinary people: for example, about the filth and trash in the city’s green spaces and parks<sup>48</sup> and on its “proletarian beaches”<sup>49</sup> or about the ruined condition of the city’s sidewalks in the city center and in the “workers’ streets of Peresyp and the Moldavanka.”<sup>50</sup> Here too he had a moral. The newspapers say, he grumbled, that there is now a “cultural revolution” underway, but it is in the “small things” (*melochi*) that one can judge “cultural” change. And the signs were not good.<sup>51</sup> In the summer of 1929, in what might have been his final column, after a silence of months, he returned to the problems of everyday life with a disenchanting complaint that while everyone is obsessing about how to improve the “culture of work,” it was time to pay more attention to the “culture of leisure” (*kul'tura otdykha*). What do workers do when they have free time? “Some simply hang around within the stuffy walls of their apartment, others wander about the streets, inhaling the hot air.” A few leave the city “with samovars, plenty of snacks, and plenty of drink.” Very few know how to enjoy properly Odessa’s southern sea and air, parks and gardens, cultured and healthy “corners” (*ugolki*), which need to be developed as people are taught a new way to rest.<sup>52</sup>

We can only guess at Svetlov’s fate. Perhaps he could not adapt to the increasing political pressure on publications to use Ukrainian rather than Russian: by 1930, Odessa’s *Izvestiia* and its evening edition, which had begun to introduce articles in Ukrainian, were closed and replaced by the Ukrainian-language *Chornomors'ka komuna*. Perhaps his obsession with the “small things” of “cultural revolution” was too much an echo of Trotskii’s arguments about “the problems of everyday life” at a time, after 1927, when Trotskii, who had been enormously popular in Odessa, had become an outcast. Perhaps Svetlov’s wry feuilletonistic style was unsuited to the rising Stalinist spirit of heroic campaigns for radical transformation. Perhaps he wrote under a new pen name. Perhaps he grew silent for personal reasons we cannot know. We do not know. But I would suggest, not unrelated to these speculations, that one reason Svetlov disappeared—or, better to say, the voice of “Svetlov,” for the point is not the author as such (who remains elusive) but a body of writings oriented in a particular way—was his all too ambiguous moral view of the

47. *Ibid.*, September 24, 1924, 3.

48. Al. Iuzhnyi, “Na temy dnia: nechto skvernoe,” *Vechnie izvestiia*, May 23, 1928, 3.

49. Al. Iuzhnyi, “Na temy dnia,” *Vechnie izvestiia*, May 22, 1928, 3.

50. Al. Iuzhnyi, “Na temy dnia: kamni vopiiut,” *Vechnie izvestiia*, June 9, 1928, 3.

51. Al. Iuzhnyi, “Na temy dnia: o kul'ture foie,” *Vechnie izvestiia*, June 9, 1928, 3; Al. Svetlov, “Na temy dnia: Melochi kul'turoi revoliutsii,” *Vechnie izvestiia*, June 27, 1928, 3. This pair of essays is a good example of very similar language and argument under the two bylines.

52. Al. Svetlov, “Voobshche, o dosuge,” *Vechnie izvestiia*, June 1, 1929, 3. On the ideology and practices of proletarian “rest,” see Diane Koenker, *Club Red: Vacation Travel and the Soviet Dream* (Ithaca, 2013), esp. introduction and chaps. 1–2.

old and the new, his sympathy for (or at least pleasure in talking about) people who felt at home in the crooked worlds of the streets amidst (in Baudelaire's words) the "ebb and flow" of the crowd, who embraced a street at odds with (in Benjamin's words) "our standardized and uniform world."<sup>53</sup> In other words, the problem may have been his inclination, in an increasingly straightened political environment, to look at life "*pod uglom*," at an angle, obliquely, askew, queerly.

### Can the Subaltern Speak?

I want to end, though, with different question, an old question: Can we know anything of the lived experiences and moral subjectivities of these street types, hear voices from *their* corner as it were, disentangle "minor" and "subaltern" voices and subjectivities from the representations and anxieties of others, especially powerful authorities?<sup>54</sup> Might we read these stories—and many other Odessa press and police stories about deformities from the past, from hooligans to bootleggers to gangsters, "against the grain," or, perhaps better to say, with Svetlov, *pod uglom*? Might we interpret the words and actions of Odessa's "corner types," living stubbornly at an angle to the normative, feeling uncannily "at home" without homes, as expressions of desire and value? Might this even be something like what the cultural historian Saidiya Hartman, in her innovative study of the experiences of African American women, has called "the beautiful anarchy of the corner," "experiments in living otherwise," "experiments in freedom"?<sup>55</sup> Might we read in this way, for example, the claims of Svetlov's twelve-year-old barfly that she saw nothing "filthy" in her "work"? Or the insistence of the catacomb kids that they found home only in the freedom of the streets and considered stealing and prostitution normal and right?

Of course, we cannot turn away from the cruelty and suffering of their lives or their behaviors toward others—exemplified by the 1926 murder in the catacombs of a ten-year-old boy robbed by a gang of homeless youths. The gang's "ataman" ordered two gang members to beat him to death because "the boy's brother serves in the local CID and might 'squeal' [*vydat'*] on them."<sup>56</sup> Nor should we reduce the diversity of crooked stories: the subjectivities and freedoms of the catacomb killers, of Svetlov's girl-barfly, of Iudka Divertissement, were obviously not identical. Nor can we even be sure whose voices we are hearing: we can never hear, we know, an unmediated subaltern voice, pure experience from below. To bring this familiar theoretical argument down to the streets of Odessa, there is a rather illustrative little story about the elusive

53. Baudelaire, "Painter of Modern Life," 9; and Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 416–55.

54. A methodological challenge posed influentially, of course, by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, eds., *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana, 1988).

55. Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* (New York, 2019), quotations xiv, 4, 15–19, 33–34, 87.

56. L. G., "Sud: Deti katakomb," *Vechernie izvestiia*, July 7, 1926, 3; for another example of murder by a gang of homeless children, "Bor'ba s detskoi bezprizornost' iu," *Vechernie izvestiia*, May 21, 1926, 3.



voices of two of the figures we have heard that deserves mention. In 1925, the actor and filmmaker Aleksei Kapler visited Odessa for the first time, seeking “signs of the real ‘Odessa-Mama.’” He finds Iudka Divertissement. He is thrilled by all that Iudka tells him about his life. But when sharing Iudka’s story later with Odessa friends, he is informed that what he had written down were mostly quotations from Svetlov’s feuilleton about Iudka, which the street-singer had memorized.<sup>57</sup>

We could take all these moral stories from the street in various interpretive directions—from victimhood, to juvenile rejection of authority, to pathological inability to conform. But I want to consider one interpretation, a skewed one, that journalists at the time often used when writing about deviance in city life: “fun.” This was offered especially when journalists reported on “hooliganism,” against which a major campaign was launched in the middle and late 1920s.<sup>58</sup> Hooliganism had always been defined promiscuously. In 1920s Odessa, it was applied to young men loudly swearing and shouting in the streets, inflicting “mean tricks” on passersby, throwing stones at trams, brawling in public places, beating up militia officers, harassing women on the streets, and disruptive behaviors, often violent, in beer halls, cafeterias, and cafés. Hooligan violence was usually said to be “for no reason” apart from meanness and aggression itself, usually excited by drunkenness—an implicit argument about irrationality, of course.<sup>59</sup> Hooliganism was manifested in physical acts, but it was defined as *moral* transgression, a violation of socially accepted definitions of normalcy, decency, reason, and culture, one of too many signs of decadent values from the past that had not yet been overcome.<sup>60</sup>

Surprisingly often, journalists wrote of hooligans as *veselye*—having fun, pleasure, amusement. They described “hooligan” gangs as a *veselaia kompaniia* (“fun crowd”), as people with a *veselyi nra* (“fun character”), as *veselye rebiata* (“fun guys”). In 1928, for example, some “*veselye rebiata*” were arrested and imprisoned for their antics in the streets of the Moldavanka. “On a quiet and peaceful Soviet evening,” Boris Veselkin (whose last name makes one wonder if the report was partly a fiction) and his hooligan buddies Bogomolov and Mikhailov, indulged in a whole “series of ‘*veselye pokhozheniia*’ (fun actions).” In a mood to “hooliganize and riot” (*khuliganit’ i deborshirovat’*) they starting throwing rocks at workers on the streets. Feeling this was not enough and deciding “really to have some fun” (*poveselit’ sia po nastoiashchemu*), they then threw rocks at buildings, breaking windows, and

57. Aleksei Kapler, *Rasskazy o tvorcheskoi puti* (Moscow, 1966), see section titled “Odessa-Mama,” *Istoriia kinematografa*, at <http://istoriya-kino.ru/books/item/f00/s00/z0000019/st009.shtml> (accessed July 7, 2023). I am grateful again to the peer reviewer who knew of this story about Iudka and Svetlov.

58. Lebina, *Povsednevnaia zhizn’*, 57–67; Gorsuch, *Youth in Revolutionary Russia*, 167–68; Wood, *Performing Justice*, 165–68.

59. From *Vechernie izvestiia*, 1923–29, and Derzhavnyi arkhiv Odes’koi Oblasti (State Archive of the Odesa Region, DAOO), fond (f.) R-107 and R-4550.

60. Joan Neuberger, *Hooliganism: Crime, Culture, and Power in St. Petersburg, 1900–1914* (Berkeley, 1993); Gorsuch, *Youth in Revolutionary Russia*, 169–76; Lebina, *Povsednevnaia zhizn’*, 57–59, 62–63.

terrifying residents. This “assault” on the homes of “workers and ordinary citizens” also did not prove satisfying enough, so they attacked a nearby club for tram workers. Then, with knives in their hands, these “jolly fellows” decided to move on, when they came across Viktor Shvartsman, who was out enjoying a peaceful stroll, whom they decided to beat up before the police finally appeared and arrested this “jolly company.”<sup>61</sup> The interpreting language of “fun” was ironic, even sarcastic, of course, hence the scare quotes invariably surrounding these terms. The storytelling was itself jocular. But the choice is telling. This tone may have reflected the desire to entertain when reporting such antics, but it also suggests ambivalence about how journalists, Svetlov among them, judged rowdy Soviet youth.

Can we glean anything of the elusive experiences, thinking, and emotions of those charged with “hooliganizing” in the streets? The trope of “fun” may have been picked up on the street itself, for “hooligans” often used it themselves. Until forced into the category by those in authority, they were not “hooligans” in their own eyes or words. “I’m a worker.”<sup>62</sup> “I’m young.”<sup>63</sup> “I am sick, maybe. I had a fit, maybe. I am person, comrade, nothing more.”<sup>64</sup> “I was drunk. . . I don’t remember.”<sup>65</sup> Very often, they explained behaviors as “just ‘simple fun’ [*prostaiia zabava*],” often adding “by a tipsy person.”<sup>66</sup> Of course, as statements in court, these arguments were appeals to those who might send them to prison. But this does not mean their declarations lacked truth as stories they also told themselves. In 1925, *Vechernie izvestiia* reported an interview with an Odessa street “hero”—another sarcasm often used in these stories—who lamented Soviet society’s growing tendency to moralize and control every corner of daily life, which felt like a war on “fun.” Life was so much better in the past, this hero declared: one could get drunk, make a public scene, kick up a fuss on the streetcar even while on the way to one’s trial, and then be freed because being drunk was an accepted excuse for a street *débauche*. Now, it was so much harder to “behave disgracefully” (*bezobraznicat’*): “It’s become hard for a fun-loving fellow to live, damn hard” (*trudno stalo zhit’ veselomu cheloveku, ei bogu trudno*).<sup>67</sup>

Soviet journalists were expected to offer readers moral and political straight talk. At its foundation was the teleological narrative trope of past vestiges and future promises, the straight path from the disorderly and crooked world of the old to the bright, healthy, progressive world of the new. This was a story with clear moral distinctions. Of course, as a Soviet Marxist story, this was a morality without “fetishized” universal norms,” based on “reason” not authority, and grounded in the experiences and interests of social classes.

61. [Unsigned], “Sud: Khuligany,” *Vechernie izvestiia*, January 10, 1928, 4.

62. A. S-v [likely Svetlov], “Zags i khuliganstvo,” *Vechernie izvestiia*, September 14, 1926, 3.

63. G. M., “Sud: Khuligan i antisemit,” *Vechernie izvestiia*, April 6, 1928, 3.

64. Nina Sid, “Iz zala suda: ‘Ne khochu dyshat’,” *Vechernie izvestiia*, October 10, 1927, 3

65. Dozorni, “Sud: Khuligany,” *Vechernie izvestiia*, October 4, 1926, 3.

66. S. F-n., “Sud: ‘Prostaia zabava,’” *Vechernie izvestiia*, June 20, 1929, 4.

67. Khoma Brut, “Vopl’ khuligana,” *Vechernie izvestiia*, November 19, 1925, 3.

Not least, “communist morality” had social and revolutionary purpose: to promote social relations without exploitation and to raise human society to a higher level.<sup>68</sup> Journalists like Svetlov were tasked, and tasked themselves, with uncovering the dark and crooked corners of city life for the sake of such moral advance.

One difficulty, we have seen, was the much lamented plague of *perezhitki*, the persistence of poisonous residues from the past. But there was a deeper and more subtle difficulty: a wavering and ambiguous moral orientation, a lingering sympathy with deviants and delinquents, even when rounding out their tales with a proper moral at the end. Perhaps journalists like Svetlov knew their audience: officials often complained that the Soviet public was “indifferent” to deviations in everyday life and did not feel proper revulsion for “evil.”<sup>69</sup> Until silenced, journalists like Svetlov often echoed these feelings.

But worse, surely, from an establishment point of view, was the orientation of wayward men and women, boys and girls. We need not romanticize deviance or overstate defiance to see something other than social inadequacy and failure, delinquency and pathology. The evidence is fragmented and filtered, but there is enough to suggest a deliberate orientation against rules and morals that limited agency, individuality, and freedom; gestures, at least, against what they were told was necessary and normative; a way of telling their own stories and making themselves visible.<sup>70</sup> To be sure, this stance was marked sometimes by what Sianne Ngai has called “ugly feelings” of cynicism and disdain for society and other people.<sup>71</sup> But their lives on the streets can also be what Saidiya Hartman has called “experiments” in “living otherwise,” not without a complex “beauty.” At least, many were trying to preserve something of their own, find spaces where power and normativity were not so great, and make the best of what the world allowed them, improvising morality as needed.

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68. N. Bukharin, “Vospitanie smeny” (from speech at Fifth Komsomol Congress, 1922), in Iaroslavskii, ed., *Kakim dolzhen byt' kommunist*, 18; Lenin, *O morali*, 309–11.

69. N. Khmel'nitskii, “Bor'ba s khuliganstvom,” *Vechernie izvestiia*, September 23, 1926, 2; “Narkomy o bor'be s khuliganstvom,” *Vechernie izvestiia*, September 18, 1926, 2; “O p'ianstve, khuliganstve (doklad tov. N. A. Semashko),” *Vechernie izvestiia*, September 26, 1926, 2.

70. This has been a key argument by some theorists of plebian violence, especially Benjamin, “Critique of Violence” (1921), in *Selected Writings* 1: 236–52; Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox, commentary by Jean-Paul Sartre and Homi K. Bhabha (New York, 2004); Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (New York, 2008).

71. Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, Mass., 2005).