

## Farewell, Mama Odessa

**Emil Draitser**

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Soviet Jews faced anti-Zionist actions within the USSR; under pressure from human rights campaigns, they were finally offered opportunities for emigration, though leaving was risky. Poignant and suspenseful, Emil Draitser's *Farewell, Mama Odessa* is an autobiographical novel about the exodus of Soviet Jews.

Two million Jews fled Russia before the Soviet Union collapsed, and this novel reveals the psyche of those people, who were caught between crushing persecutions and uncertain futures. The story focuses on Boris, a young journalist whose illusions about "Mother Russia" are blasted, and his older cousin, Ilya, who emigrated to America years earlier. A third character, Yuri, adds a touch of dark comedy with his clumsy attempts to gather the funds and paperwork needed to leave the country and win back his gorgeous ex-wife.

These characters are caught between their love for Odessa, a cosmopolitan, cultural Black Sea port city, and their desire for freedom. The assertion that "there is no such thing as a former Odessan" is supported by profound insights. The text captures the emotions that bind people to the places they know and love, even as it includes Odessa's history of pogroms against Jews. While detailing the travails of the fleeing Jewish populations, the book also includes lighthearted moments, unexpected kindnesses, and humorous events that sparkle with a distinct Odessan sense of humor, noting absurdities with wit and more than a little satire.

*Farewell, Mama Odessa* is a compassionate and timely novel. It brings to life the hopes, fears, and practical realities involved in exile and flights to freedom, honoring those who risked everything and generating compassion for today's refugees.

KRISTINE MORRIS (January / February 2020)

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