

# The Greeks of Odessa: the spiritual home of Philiki Eteria

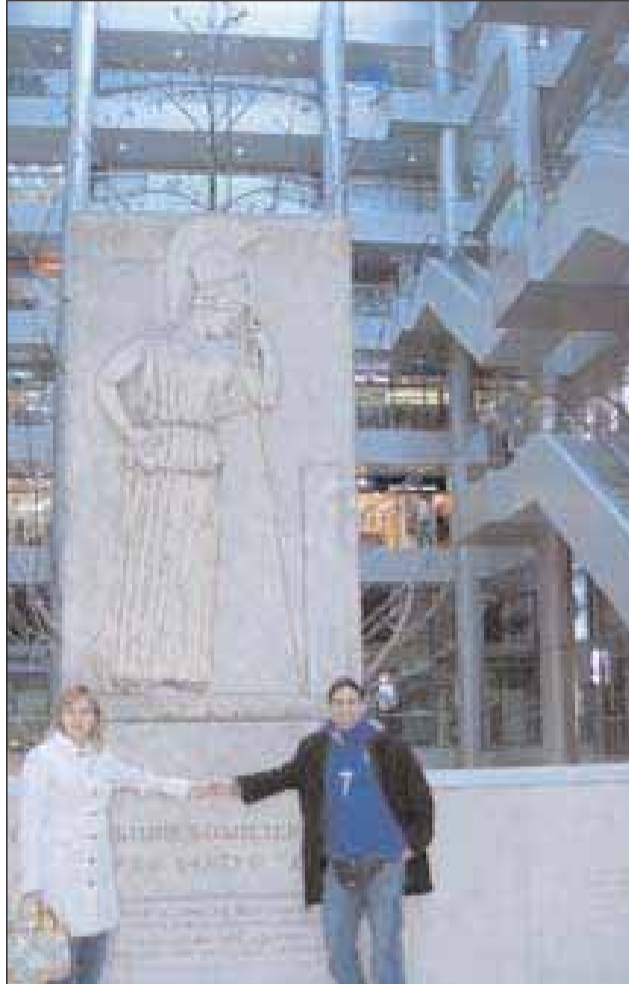
*It had been an unusually cold period for that time of the year in the Ukraine. We were waiting anxiously, freezing, near the village's only shop. It was a rather overcast day. I had already asked people if they spoke Greek, surprisingly the responses I received were: 'Ukrainian, Russian, Bulgarian, English.' Then I heard a group of middle aged and older women speaking Greek. I rushed over to them to chat – but this was no facebook chat window. They were initially hesitant and frightened by an outsider, who seemed to be able to speak their language. As I did so the sun finally came out ..... now lets backtrack for a minute. How did I get to this small village near the Black Sea?*

## **Kiev**

Standing by the river in Kiev a few weeks ago I was relieved to be back in the Ukraine. This time I was here on a holiday and not to visit the Greek towns of Marioupolis near Russia. Kiev is one of the most fascinating cities in Europe; charming, elegant, captivating, visually pleasing. More importantly it has no Greek history, or so I thought!

When I wrote about the Greeks of Marioupolis ('Ola Kala kai Panta Kala') in 2004, I promised myself I would return to the Ukraine to experience local culture and cuisine. So here I was in 2008, taking in the sites with my friend Athena Khadzhynova who organised my Marioupolis trip all those years ago.

After visiting an Uzbekistan restaurant we made it to the river. It was nice and peaceful when suddenly, out of nowhere, Athena told me about the Greek towns of the Crimea and Odessa on the Black Sea. This was not why I came to Kiev! I didn't want to know about the Greek descendents of the Crimea and Odessa, I just wanted a relaxing holiday in the



Ukraine capital.

The next day Athena took me to a Greek restaurant (the food was exquisite) and then it was off to see the Agia Sofia cathedral. This was built by 1037 as the sister church to Agia Sophia in Constantinople, then a Greek city under Byzantine control. The cathedral was originally a 5 apse church and had 13 domes. There are countless frescoes of Greek saints adorning the interior walls. As I stood in

the cathedral admiring the similarities with the Byzantine church, I began to realize that Kiev would lead to another Greek adventure.

And so it should. It was after all the Greeks under Emperor Basil II who converted the people of Kiev to Christianity by baptizing Prince Vladimir in 989. He took the Byzantine princess Anne as his bride. The Greeks initially provided Kiev with a Metropolitan and greatly influenced their culture. In turn, Kiev would thereafter send to Constantinople the important Varangian Guard and troops whenever they were required.

Within minutes of departing from Agia Sofia I had found a travel agent. The only available flight for the next day was to Odessa. So it was set, another former Greek place to visit in the Ukraine.

## **Crimea**

Before we arrive in Odessa, I thought a brief overview of Crimea is worth mentioning despite not visiting this region. The ancient and Byzantine Greeks have had a tremendous impact on the Crimea. In the seventh century BC, a number of colonies were established, including Berezan, Chersonesus, Feodosiya, Panticapaeum. Within decades a Greek kingdom existed that maintained close ties to Athens.

## **The ancient Greek colony of Chersonesos, Sevastopol.**

Hercules made visits to the Crimea – known as Tauris in ancient times, it is also known for Achilles and his wife Iphigenia who ruled on the island of Leuce. Euripides wrote 'Iphigenia in Tauris' and many other famous authors of ancient times wrote about the region including the historian Herodotos. Many poems were also written about Tauris.

The Pontians captured the Crimea by 114 BC last-

The museum also contains a Greek library, art classes, Greek books for sale and a Greek school. The school was established as the Centre for Modern Greek Studies in 2000, with 75% of the students being ethnic Ukrainian.



ing until Roman rule arrived in 63 BC. The Greeks of Byzantium held the Crimea intermittently from the fourth century AD until gaining real control early in the eleventh century AD. In 1204 control of the Crimean tip passed to the Greeks of Trebizond until 1461. Greek was spoken as a major language in the Crimea for 2000 years. There are still many Greek speakers and descendents in some of the towns in the region, a truly amazing accomplishment.

There are a number of Greek sites and museums in the region, for a more comprehensive coverage see 'Ancient Greek Sites in the Crimean Peninsular,' published by the Odessa branch of the Hellenic Foundation for Culture.

## **Odessa**

Arriving at Odessa airport was a delight - you get to pick up your luggage from the back of a ute outside the exit. No such thing as customs and rigid security. I met my first Greek of Odessa at the airport – he was however from Greece!