



A Greek from Australia sitting with Athena, a Greek from the Marioupolis region where they call themselves Romai (Greeks from the Byzantine Empire – Roman citizens) and 2 Greeks whose roots go back to the Greek presence in Bulgaria.

Odessa on the Black Sea is the fourth biggest city in the country with a population of over 1 million people. It is easy enough to get around and even easier to find a Greek restaurant. Except of course the Greek ouzeri – we had instructions, a map, a phone a friend option and a recommendation from other Greeks to go there but never found it.

In ancient times Odessa was known as Olbia and founded by the Miletians around 502 BC. Over the next 2000 years the city had numerous overlords – the ancient Greeks, Romans, Byzantine Greeks, Turks, Russians, as well as various other tribes or rulers. Greek persisted as a spoken language until the middle ages before subsiding. The Russian, Catherine the Great officially founded the city with the name of Odessa in 1794, a play on the original Greek name Olbia.

During the late 1700's and early 1800's many Greeks from the Ottoman Empire found their way to Odessa. For the first time in centuries Greek was a language that was spoken, and spoken often in Odessa. Today it is the fourth language of Odessa. One of the main city streets is known as Greek Street (Grecheskaya) which I was lucky enough to visit.

A few blocks down from Grecheskaya you will find the Greek 'area.' The Greek Emporiko Kentro complete with Greek flags, columns, statues, Greek frescoes and Greek designed shops. I felt like I was in Greece except I could not hear the sound of motor bikes, young men shouting expletives for no apparent reason, no frappe and it was very modern!

The Greek church of Odessa is Saint Troiskaya located at Ekaterininskaya 67. In 1821 after the unfortunate murder of Patriarch Gregory V in Constantinople, his body was brought here for burial by the Greek patriots.

**Philiki Eteria**

Odessa will forever be a special place in Greek history, regardless of where Hellenic history may take us over the next 2000 years.

In 1814 several brave men met in Odessa to pursue ways to overthrow Ottoman rule in Greek lands. These men, heroes in the same vain as Hercules, Alexander the Great, Basil II, Constantine Paleologos were Nikolaos Skoufas, Emmanuil Xanthos and Athanasios Tsakalov. The story of the Philiki Eteria does not necessarily concern us here suffice to say that the foundations of Greek freedom had been firmly set in Odessa.

I had the privilege of visiting the home and museum of the Philiki Eteria. As it was a Saturday, the museum was closed. Athena, as she has so often in the past, came to my rescue and arranged for a private tour. The security guard spoke Greek, among a number of different languages and he provided us with a tour of this small yet, on a cultural level, massive museum. You can say that the Louvre is one of the world's greatest, but the Philiki Eteria has some-

thing else – it contains the key to unlocking modern Greek freedom. Not many museums can match this important element.

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. I was fortunate enough to meet Nanoushka Podkovyroff who teaches Greek here. Her mother is Greek and father is French and has lived in Odessa since 1996. She seems to pride herself on teaching Greek in Odessa and spoke glowingly of her students, praising the Ukrainian pupils for their diligence. She told me that Greek is also taught at some of the Odessan schools and the university.

**Greek Village**

So this brings us back to the Greek village – Xorio Sverdlovo (Malyy Buyalyk). After frightening the Greek speaking women – they seemed reluctant to talk to me, we decided to look for the President of the Greek society, Tatyana Orynyanskaya. The local Ukrainian women from the church called her on our behalf. She agreed to meet us with the President of the Village, Yuriy Kavanda.

The village has approximately 500 residents and it is about 15 km from Odessa. It is isolated and has plenty of open space for children to play and animals to roam. A beautiful Ukrainian church can be found at the centre of the village. We met both Yuriy and Tatyana at the church and soon migrated to the restaurant on the outskirts of the local village. I was really looking forward to eating Ukrainian or

Russian cuisine. As it turned out, we ate the local Greek food!

Yuriy was the first Greek person in the village to be elected to the post of President. He only speaks limited Greek but is proud of his heritage. Tatyana speaks a Greek dialect which is different to the one I have learnt in Australia. They told me that 25% of the village speaks Greek. The number was higher, however many have moved out or the young have not been able to maintain the language. Originally 48 Greek families came to the area in 1799 from Bulgaria and until this day the Greek language has persisted in the village.

We had an enjoyable lunch and it must have been interesting for anyone to watch. A Greek from Australia sitting with Athena, a Greek from the Marioupolis region where they call themselves Romai (Greeks from the Byzantine Empire – Roman citizens) and 2 Greeks whose roots go back to the Greek presence in Bulgaria.

**Greek holiday and post script**

In 2008 I went to Greece 5 times and on each occasion I have seen things that have upset me about my country – unruly behavior of some Greeks towards foreigners, overpriced frappe, rudeness on some of the islands and a few unscrupulous tour operators. Yet when I meet the Greeks in places such as the Ukraine who continue to hold on to their identity I can't help but feel patriotic. The Greek spirit remains impressively alive and well in some areas of the Ukraine. From my end I was glad to have made the visit to Odessa. It puts the concept of Hellenism into perspective and makes me proud to be a Greek.

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