

Zooming in on Ukraine

A tour guide carries on in war-torn Odesa

By BEN G. FRANK

You'd think that 46-year-old tour guide Olga Bokhonovskaya, of Odesa, Ukraine, would have given up being a guide by now.

No way!

Like thousands of tour guides all over the world, she was doing pretty well until the spring of 2020, when COVID smashed the travel industry and ceased the flow of tourists to her country.

By January 2022, however, tourism began to come back somewhat for tour guides. In that month, a few tourists from Russia, Belarus and other Eastern European countries arrived to visit one of the most beautiful cities in Ukraine, the Black Sea port of Odesa.

During the pandemic, Olga, like thousands of other guides, had turned to Zoom. At the beginning of this year, I watched her on a live-stream Zoom talk. Since it was a virtual tour, I felt I was walking alongside her in the city. The Zoom, which was sponsored by the Museum of Jewish Heritage in New York City and arranged by Our Travel Circle Company, was an indication that Zoom programs kept much of the travel industry alive.

On Zoom, I could refresh my memory of a visit to Odesa, and I admired Olga's live tour passing the buildings designed in neo-classic, architectural-style, including the still-standing attractive yellow-and-white mansions, many of which display a Mediterranean style. I walked through many of the most attractive tourist sites the city has to offer, such as the historic section of Moldavanka, which the great Soviet Jewish writer Isaac Babel made famous in his *Odesa Stories*.

Conducting virtual tours wasn't the same as taking a group of tourists around town,

but it was manageable. And then the war hit. On February 24, Russia launched its brutal invasion into this independent country – wreaking havoc on its population, killing thousands of civilians; sending thousands of others into exile and cutting off tourism to the country. By all accounts, Olga's touring company, Odesa Walks, should have been put to rest.

Not at all!

Despite the fact that no tourists are coming to Odesa, Olga soldiers on. She is still out there doing Zoom talks. These days, carrying her camera, she has perched herself at the still-open Boutique Hotel California, at 7 Yevreskaya St., which she noted is next door to the historic Main Synagogue, once known as the Great Synagogue. Closed down under the Communists, this house of worship was converted into a sports facility but was remodeled after the fall of the USSR in 1991.

Olga has noticed many Jewish seniors gathering at the synagogue in the morning to receive food packages. Also, Chabad, at 21 Osipova St., is functioning and led by Rabbi Avraham Wolf, chief rabbi of Odesa and southern Ukraine. Recently, Chabad's kosher restaurant, Rozmarin, at 5 Yspenskaya St., opened. JDC continues to operate its social and emergency response services for Jews in need, as well as cultural, educational volunteer programs in Odesa.

Boutique Hotel California, with its beautiful chandeliers and attractive décor in the Russian imperial design, is owned by an Odesa local who in 2008 constructed the building and installed in a hotel gallery photos and even intimate clothing items of the star Marilyn Monroe – items management says are authentic.

From the hotel, Olga starts her Zoom on the city's exciting place in Jewish and Zionist history. It's not hard to attract viewers to



Olga Bokhonovskaya points to the mezuzah at the entrance to the Boutique Hotel California, Odesa. (Courtesy photo: Olga Bokhonovskaya.)



The interior of the historic Main Synagogue, aka the Great Synagogue, which is now closed. (Odesa Walks)

live-stream programs on Odesa. Visitors immediately feel that the city has spice to it, a touch of the Riviera. It stood as a true melting pot of Ukrainians, Russians, Greeks, Turks and Jews. Before the Russians attacked, about 30,000 Jews called Odesa their home. Since then, many women and children have left. "Men are staying in the city," said Olga. Still, Odesa remains as a once vibrant center of Jewish culture and a great intellectual center of Russian Jewry.

In telling Odesa's dramatic and romantic story with her camera, she does wander away from the hotel during her virtual tour to a few nearby streets or a close-by neighborhood, security permitting. She sprinkles her vibrant talk with researched tidbits and anecdotes. Her talks are featured on heygo.com, which is a worldwide Zoom travel network. Guides are compensated by tips from viewers.

Going off the beaten track can be dangerous.

"Now the city is under constant fear. The sirens ring out five or six times a day," she told me in a Zoom chat. "After a while, you'd go crazy running every time to a shelter. Living 15 minutes away from the port can get pretty frightening," she said, citing a Russian missile strike on the harbor in July.

City attractions include the famous Opera House and Odesa Potemkin Stairs. These steps are as sacred a site to the people of Ukraine as Runnymede and Yorktown are to Americans.

Olga is quick to point out that Odesa was a Zionist city. Many of the city's Zionist leaders and literati became some of Israel's well-known personalities: Menachem Ussishkin, Meir Dizengoff, Ahad Ha'am, Haim

Nahman Bialik, Shaul Tchernichovsky, Ze'ev Jabotinsky and others.

A historical part of Odesa's Zionist history consists of the story of the SS *Ruslan*, often called the "Mayflower of the Land of Israel." In 1919, it was one of the last boatloads of Jews that fled Russia before the Soviets closed the border, as well as one of the ships that entered Palestine before the British Mandate went into effect. At the time, only returning residents of Ottoman Empire Palestine were permitted to board the ship. Not all of the 600 passengers, however, had proper documents.

To get the so-called "illegals" on, papers were forged, a practice later used in fighting British Mandate policy restricting Jewish immigration. When the *Ruslan* sailed from Odesa, suddenly all the passengers became returning Jews who had lived in Palestine under the Ottoman Turks. Aboard the ship was a pantheon of intellectuals, ideologues, artists and poets, leaders and activists in the Zionist movement, among them Rachel Bluwstein, known as Rachel the Poetess.

That was then. Hopefully, the war will end.

"Today's Zoom is nothing like a group walking tour, but it's the best I can do under the given circumstances," said Olga. For now, she'll continue her Zoom tours. ■

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