

Brighton Beach

I had fallen into a sleepy haze as the Q train approached the Brighton Beach Station, the long ride and sun peering into the subway windows created a comfortable aroma on a plastic seat. I knew it was the very last stop as I noticed everyone traveling with me in the train car made their way off onto the station platform. Looking out before I descended down the station stairs, I could see bits of the colorful Coney Island in the distance, and shimmering water far off dancing in front of my eyes. A gust of wind took me back a bit while zipping up my jacket from the cool winter air, but the sun provided a glimpse of warmth.

As I stepped down onto the avenue the sun disappeared behind the tracks above, the deafening sound of the clacking train persisted and then vanished in the distance while the normal disturbances of honking cars and music came back to life. To keep myself from looking like a confused and lost tourist, I kept walking down the sidewalk casually but kept my gaze wide to what felt like a whole other city in another country. Passing store by store I saw colorful Russian signs and windows everywhere with people flushing in and out of doors, talking, laughing, and selling things on the street. I felt my sleepy haze wear off and the liveliness of the neighborhood bringing back energy to my body, being there was almost overstimulating. Music filtered throughout my ears, mixing with soft tunes of a nearby restaurant and the heavy beat of a black Mercedes driving up the avenue. I passed dozens and dozens of females wrapped and bundled in their fur coats talking on the phone in loud Russian. As I passed through the crowds, I felt much like an outsider looking into their world, everything seemed so different than the hectic life of Manhattan.

Looking into each store window while walking by in a slow manner I had begun to notice small grocers and markets were extremely common along with clothing stores that varied from luxury furs to discounted fashion, candy shops, nic nac bookstores, and Halal restaurants. I found a quaint grocery store with fresh fruit in huge mounds in the front windows and decided to step in. Eyes locked on to me for a brief moment when I entered, but they quickly shot away to look back at the shelves. There was a meat counter in the back with a long line of local costumers buying their dinner for the week and countless loaves of bread to my left. I watched as a shop worker opened the door to a bread elevator where the delicious smell of freshly baked goodness filled the air from below. I moved slow and observant while looking at all the Russian products on the shelves trying to figure out what exactly they were. My attention changed to watch some of the locals in the store but acting like I was shopping to not stare completely. An elderly woman waiting patiently asked for a loaf the zavarnoy bread and then shuffled her way over to the meat counter to order some veal knockwurst while glancing at two non-Russian women having a conversation nearby. After wondering about sometime in the store I came across some pryaniki cookies that looked delicious and decided to buy a bag. Waiting in line I noticed everyone was paying in cash and a debit card was nowhere in sight, luckily, I found a five-dollar bill in wallet but was still curious as to why cash was so common here.

Back on the street I didn't know where to look as the Russian signs and lights dazzled in front of my eyes. Venturing a little further down the sidewalk I found a window with a huge "We Sell Vinyl" sign surrounded by almost ten other posters and made my way to the door. Stepping in felt like walking back in time, old vinyl covered every wall and boxes of old books were littered across the base of the shelves. Towards the back there were rows upon rows of CDs in every Russian genre that you could imagine. I thought to myself, are people seriously still buying CDs? I questioned this as I watched a woman and the

grey-haired shop owner talking near the front and inserting a disc into a stereo player. A set of old wooden stairs in the back caught my curiosity and drew me to the second floor where more Russian books filled the walls and a man behind a computer looking at me querying. I finished examining the shelves as I couldn't understand anything and made my way back downstairs towards the door. Exiting back onto the sidewalk was like walking back into the current year.

A slight breeze came across my shoulders and I turned my attention to finding a way to the beach. I turned a corner off the avenue and walked down 4th street to find some vendors near the side of buildings selling random things. Nearing the boardwalk, I made my way past some elderly women sitting outside one of the residential buildings and felt their strong gaze upon me as I moved swiftly by. They definitely knew I wasn't Russian. The sound of the distant waves drew near while I moved up upon the old, wooden boardwalk and the sand finally met the bottom of my feet. The beach was quite deserted, but a few people moved slowly along the shore, walking their dogs, and taking in the winter sun. In the distance white ships sailed by and reminded me of home and the warm summer days of being near the water. I got as close as I could to the water without getting my shoes wet and pondered in the wet sand below to find shells and huge horseshoe crabs. There was a certain serenity to the beach that soothed me and provoked the feeling of being completely disconnected from the city. It was so empty out on the shore that it felt like I had it all to myself, a feeling of being happily alone, which I haven't felt in so long. Some time had passed as I moved along the beach and a sense of hunger came over me. Looking on the maps on my phone I found a halal place right on the avenue and ventured back in that direction. The sight of the beach dissipated in the distance and the familiar Russian community came back to life.

I passed by a colossal yellow awning labeled Saint Petersburg Bookstore and examined the Russian nesting dolls sitting in the window vibrant in their colors. I decided to step in and look around the store a bit before settling down for a late lunch. Upon entering I was instantly overwhelmed with all the items surrounding me from fine china to children's toys. The actual bookstore part of it was all the way in the back corner and few customers sifted around. It reminded of gift shops where the walls are suffocated in nic nacs and stuffed animals that enthralled the attention of everyone. My concentration turned back to the nesting dolls towards the front as the selection had a diverse array of characters and colors, some were even humorous in their dramatic features such as plastering the faces of Putin and Donald Trump on the ceramic and pairing them together. There were even Putin bobbleheads in the store. It was surprising to see that actual locals were in there shopping around for the day, I saw one lady buying some pots and pans and another woman placing some plates along with a Russian wall calendar in her husbands' arms.

My hunger had taken back over and drove me to where I had originally been planning to go before my easily distraction and curious mind turned my path. I neared the sign that read Bevti Turkish Kebab and knew I had found the right place. At first, I was hesitant because there were many other options nearby, but the sight into the restaurant seemed compelling enough to me. I passed by a huge counter and grill in the front where cooks were busy shaving the prepared meats and was then greeted by a waitress with a thick accent. The menu was quite large, one with numerous pages that felt like it would never end. Me and my indecisiveness wanted to order everything as it all looked delicious, but I ended up with a hummus plate and a chicken gyro sandwich that was enormous. After my extremely large meal, I sat back to look around the restaurant and watch some of the people that flowed in and out. It was no luxurious place by any means, but more of a hole in the wall that was filled with locals all the time. Most

of the people around me where speaking a foreign language to what looked like family members and enjoying their meal like it was any other day.

Upon looking at the time and the setting sun in the distance I figured it was time to head back home. Being the sponge that I am, I felt that I had soaked up much of the culture that exudes out of this small but eccentric neighborhood. The main avenue was still full of life, music and vendors on the street still persisted as they were when I first stepped down the station stairs and locals poured out onto the sidewalks laughing and talking on a typical Sunday night. As I made my way towards the overhead tracks, I ventured into a candy shop that seemed to have chocolates from all over the world. It was quaint store with soft yellow lights and weaved baskets hanging overhead. Funny enough another meat counter was nestled in the back. I got a little baggie with an assortment of chocolates and candy to enjoy later that night along with the pryaniki cookies I bought earlier. The cool winter air sifted past my shoulders as I moved back to the station and a chill took over while waiting for the train, luckily, I had enough treats to snack on for the trip back.

Brighton Beach has a seemingly unique and similar history to many of the other immigrant neighborhoods in New York City. This neighborhood's history began decades ago before it would eventually become known as "Little Odessa" because of its elevated Russian population and culture. Russian immigrants actually didn't start settling the area until the 1970's while trying to escape the gripping Soviet Union and start new lives for themselves. Many would also assume that the migrants would be labeled as Russian Americans but in fact most of those who first immigrated were Soviet-Jews. As from what I saw while I was there, the crowds aren't primarily Russian, and many other ethnicities have been living in the area long before Little Odessa became a thing. According to the book *The Brooklyn Nobody Knows: An Urban Walking Guide*, "30 percent of the population is a mix of Turks, Chinese, Uzbeks, Kazaks, Pakistanis, and Indians, Hispanics, blacks, and American-born whites of various backgrounds lived in the area before..." (Helmrich p. 363). It's interesting to see that this area has almost always had a revolving door of different cultures flowing in and out of it. Today, many groups are immigrating from central Russian republics to settle in the area as well as a growing number of Muslims. Another compelling note is that many of the generational and younger Russians with a little more money on their backs are leaving Brighton Beach and moving to areas like Sheepshead Bay and Mill Basin to escape from what they think is a crowded, poor place to live. Upon reading this I recalled that I didn't see many young adults and families when I visited the area, most of the crowds were middle aged and quite elderly, making the population there original of immigrants from the Soviet Union. The younger crowd of those in the area have made their thoughts clear of Brighton Beach. In *The Last Soviet-Americans*, a former resident named Yulia who grew up in Brighton Beach said, "when I lived there, I despised all the parochialism, the absences of understanding personal space. Everyone there considers your private life their business" (Borodulin p. 36). This to me explains why I examined such an older crowd during my observance of the area, and her quote alludes to a point that the residents of Brighton Beach are a very tight-knit community where everyone knows everyone.

Once the area was nestled in again during the 1970's, a new history would soon begin for a street that was often referred to as a slum. The Russian Mafia often comes to mind when you see black Mercedes and gnarly looking men driving them and many presumed that the mafia came along for the ride while immigrating. Crime in the area began to pick up heavily in the 1980's and 90's that many local residents say was partly due by the mafia who was led by both non-Jewish and Jewish leaders that came

from Russia and local police provoking the younger crowds. The town wasn't necessarily a safe spot to be and became somewhat dirty around that time. A resident named Phil who grew up in Brighton Beach told of how "it's a good area now" but "in the 1980's there were prostitutes across the subway" (Helmrich p. 365). I never felt unsafe at any point when I visited the area, everything to me seemed like a normal busy neighborhood where everyone was happy. I think Brighton Beach went through its share of violence and crime back in the day, but now that the population is primarily older it's definitely become less mafia driven.

Many residents have mixed feelings of the other immigrants in the town and express that not all of them think alike. The Soviet Union wasn't a place where you could live extravagantly or have luxurious things with a few exceptions to notable families and leaders. The so called "American Dream" was an attractive advertisement to immigrants from all over the world and led to such a high influx of new migrants seeking new opportunity. Russians knew that they could get a lot of more here than they could anywhere else. A resident named Natalia who moved to Brighton Beach in 1996 said, "Some people here, in decorating their homes, chase after luxury that they couldn't afford over there" (Borodulin p. 37). Those who came here first more than likely realized what they could afford and relayed the word back to those in the Soviet Union/Russia who dreamed of having such items. Natalia also gave off examples of the luxury buys of new immigrants which consists of "leather sofas, faux gold and antiques..." and she noted that this behavior was "unbelievable...my husband and I call it Barbarian splendor" (Borodulin p. 37).

There's a lot of character along the main drag in Brighton Beach and in its heyday, it was vibrant with a passionate and strong bond in the newly formed community. They made their new home as comfortable as they could in such a foreign place, and many think that the area is frozen in time, still trying to create what its past once was. Longtime residents think that Little Odessa will never be what it once was again as they've seen the growing disconnect in the area. One of which named Seva Kaplan said the denizens of Brighton "used to be human rights defenders, dissidents, fighters for greater freedom, but now that's all gone..." and says that the infamous area is now "a state of mind rather than geography" (Borodulin p. 38). He and many others presume that the "Russian enclave will not exist 10-20 years from now" (Borodulin p. 38). Along with a dissipating strong community, other immigrants are finding their way into the area, much like the Russians and Jews did 50 years ago. It's a place that's proven anything can thrive there, especially any kind of business that's directed towards the specific ethnicity that predominately populates the area. Brighton Beach has seen a large influx of Central Asian immigrants calling this place their new home and competing with the once thriving Russian population. People have also seen how some emigrants are taking advantage of businesses in the area. One noticed how "emigrants from Tajikistan and Uzbekistan are running circles around the older inhabitants: their mini-markets work around the clock. In Brighton you can buy anything, day or night" (Borodulin p. 38).

There seems to be a lot of change coming to the area, which can be a good and bad thing, and also affect large groups of people. Many could see this as a normal process as humans naturally populate and leave certain areas and others could see it as displacement. What is important to remember that Brighton Beach contains a strong culture that is extremely essential in adding to overall diversity of New York City and even the United States. Many of the cities and towns we see and live in today were once founded on those who immigrated from all over the world looking to create their own piece of life. These

immigrant rich communities are what keeps New York the melting pot that it always has been and hopefully persist long into the near future.

Bibliography

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