

## THE SKY-WRECKS DRIVE | LEILA DANZIGER

With masts sung earthwards  
the sky-wrecks drive.

Onto this woodsong  
you hold fast with your teeth.

You are the songfast  
pennant.

Paul Celan  
(translated from the German by Pierre Joris)

His memories of the crossing are focused on a single gesture: groping under heaps of books and papers for a small atlas portraying Germany and the World (Deutschland und die Welt) that he said he used to page through during the journey to Brazil with his parents. No other memory remains but this, leafing through that book. Among its pages is a small form of undefined color issued by the Compagnie Maritime des Chargeurs Réunis with the name of the Aurigny: the ship that brought them from Hamburg to Rio de Janeiro, stopping along the way at Antwerp, Le Havre, Corunna and Casablanca. On December 24, it reached its destination, after 25 days at sea.

Left behind was a nation to which they thought they belonged – Germany – criminally remodeled by the racist laws of Nuremberg that mutilated the concept of citizenship, leaving it restrictive and exclusionary throughout the entire Reich. Envelope 708, from Steamship List N° 378 with the papers of the Aurigny, documents the disembarkation of 42 passengers, 32 of them Jewish immigrants who included Alfred (49), Irene (37) and Rolf (14): my grandparents and father. Almost messianic in dimensional, the Aurigny is moored firmly in the myths of the roots of my family, its arrival in the land of redemption, as my father called Brazil

This project was prompted by other names, as well as the Aurigny. Contacts with friends and relatives brought to light the Almanzora (December 26, 1938 with my uncle and great-aunts Erich, Klara and Helga Abraham); the General Artigas (August 17, 1939 with Hilde, Martin and Edith Seligmann, from Márcio Seligmann-Silva); and the Conte Grande (April 4, 1939 with Franca Cohen Gottlieb, from Raul Gottlieb).

When seeing these documents retrieved from the National Archives, I simply wanted to open them and question their gaps and spaces, blend the different lists together, launch them once again in the present through a great arc of names and destinations encompassing not only those who found a safe harbor, but also so many others whose quests proved fruitless. Viewing the lists themselves as vessels, “floating pieces of space” as Foucault defines ships, utmost heterotopias holding the names of passengers and their personal data – age, gender, religion and profession (largely invented), marital status, place of departure, last address in the country of origin, and destination.

In clear tribute to Lasar Segall, the title of this project refers to one of his most celebrated works, painted between 1939 and 1941 when emigrant ships packed with refugees were setting sail over the oceans. But on Segall’s canvas, the vessel does not seem to be sailing towards an earthly port, but is rather slanted towards heaven, as accurately noted by Paulo Sérgio Duarte: “the plane on which the image lies is rising, climbing, elevating [...]”. The vessel is “paradoxically sailing upwards as though, regardless of past or future storms, its direction is lost in the infinite, not directed towards any port.”<sup>1</sup> and we are well aware that unattainable ports lead to “pits in the air”, in the powerful poetry of Paul Celan, who Theodor Adorno believes responds legitimately — in other words, with infinite discretion — to extreme horror.

Early in the second decade of the XXI century, while researching ship passenger lists in the National Archives in Rio de Janeiro, the Mediterranean was filled with flimsy vessels carrying desperate passengers. Lampedusa, Lesbos, Kalymnos and Sète are some of the points on an escape route from death, which is far

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<sup>1</sup> DUARTE, Paulo Sergio. Sua vida inclui a tristeza, mesmo nos momentos mais felizes. In: *A gravura de Lasar Segall*. Rio de Janeiro: Paço Imperial, 1987.

from resolved. The Mediterrâneo series is made from files found on the Internet, videos that seem to almost touch real life, tossed into the Internet like a bottle into the sea, although always from the standpoint of salvage. When dealing with the visual flows that reached me through the communications media, I wondered what could be done to include the disaster in the texture of the image, in some way. Working with information drawn from news websites, as well as databases set up in an attempt to keep pace with this ceaseless inflow of migrants, where refugees are not identified, but only the names of beaches and ports, and approximate numbers and descriptions of bodies. This information adds a new and terrible layer of meaning to the history of the Mediterranean, to which historian Fernand Braudel devoted his attention: The Mediterranean as a whole is this space-movement. What approaches it, wars, shadows of walls, technical aspects, epidemics, light or heavy materials, precious or base, all is metabolized by the flow of its bloodstream and carried far away; here or there this flow pauses and lays down sediment that is subsequently swept away, perennially propagated or even rejected when beyond its limits.<sup>2</sup>

I tried to integrate great literature about the Mediterranean with new narratives produced through hyperlinks highlighting these events. What is the image of the information, this condensed version of visuality and discourse that buzzes ceaselessly on our smartphones and screens? I believe that, in my attempt to produce images, I am always dealing with ruin, the wreck of information that ages as soon it ceases to be new. Newspapers and media produce instant relics, as perceived so well by Jorge Luís Borges, calling newspapers the “museums of ephemeral minutiae”. And I like the suggestion of Peter Geimer, that it would be necessary to write a history of auto-iconoclasm of the image as the medium – the history of the self-destruction of images. I note that my desire for images is always burdened by this wish for elimination, wreckage, the destruction of the image, with only the image in danger. Or, in the words of Celan: image — this “woodsong” to which we hold fast like shipwrecked survivors.

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<sup>2</sup> BRAUDEL, Fernand. *O Mediterrâneo e o Mar Mediterrâneo na Época de Felipe II*, vol. I. São Paulo, 2016, p. 377.