

ALL THE SHIPS | MÁRCIO SELIGMANN-SILVA

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Foto: Joana França

As dwellers in the modern era, Freud described us as beings condemned to discontent (Unbehagen). Culture demands so many sacrificial drives that our very being – an unstable and flimsy construct of flesh and feelings – is reduced to Unbehagen: discontent,

Culture demands so many sacrificed drives that our being, a frail and flimsy construct of flesh and feelings, is reduced not only to Unbehagen: discontent, but above all to “homelessness”. In German behaglich describes a comfortable place; the derived verb of hegen means to warm. This semantic universe relates to a feeling of protection, a walled or fenced area where we can build up our trust in the world.

Anyone suddenly forced to abandon their home (heim), their homeland (heimat) suffers a breach in this trust. With no solid footing, people view the world askew, or the world seems off-kilter: it becomes weird and unfamiliar, Unheimlich, which is another key concept for Freud and psychoanalysis. As Vilém Flusser wrote on the exile: “homeless and without protection for the habitual and persistent, everything that reaches us is noise, nothing is information, and in a world without information, in chaos, it is not possible to feel, think or act.”¹ A Jew born in Prague in 1920, Flusser wrote this from his own experience, as he himself narrated: “everyone to whom I was mysteriously related in some way in Prague was murdered. All of them. The Jews in the gas chambers, the checks in the Resistance, the Germans in the Russian Campaign.”² After this annihilation, he reinvented himself in Brazil, arriving in 1940.

During the time of Freud, Kafka (although not exiled nor migrant), also described this “discontent” as homelessness in characters such as his K in *The Trial*. Anatol Rosenfeld read this novel as a type of boundary for the Wandering Jew who is always an outsider, commenting: “Nevertheless, Josef K died without knowing why. Kafka’s sisters were murdered in a concentration camp, also without knowing why. And the author of *The Trial* would come to a similar end if he had lived longer. Kafka also died without knowing why.”³ He views Kafka as an exemplary case that is consequently universal: he moves beyond the Jewish situation. “No sensitive person who really experiences the current moment can be completely closed off to this ‘theology of exile’ – a formula that perhaps defines essential aspects of the Kafka’s work.”⁴ He also mentioned the “dubious privilege” of being seen as a type of pioneer and paradigm in this contemporary experience that, I add here, is becoming omnipresent in the XXI century.

After World War II and Auschwitz, it was left to Romanian-born poet Paul Celan (Czernowitz, 1920) to describe the deepening of our discontent in his poems. He defined his poetic as a *Toposforschung*: the quest for a *tópos*, a *u-topia*. His poetry constantly seeks to demarcate the un-limited, giving shape to the shapeless, this Unbehagen, Unheimlich, or catastrophe that now defines us. As Celan said, his poetry attempts to construct “Fences around the unbounded unspoken” (“Einfriedungen um das grenzenlos Wortlose”). *Einfriedung* derives from *Frieden* (peace), in the Biblical sense of the word: “Friede auf Erde” [Peace on Earth], which in turn gave rise to the German word for a cemetery: *Friedhof*. Not without reason, Uta Werner defined Celan’s poetry as speech (*Rede*) directed towards the display of the mute, meaning a poetry that is attempting to create a “tomb in the text”, literally: in-terrifying the dead (in German, earth – *Erde* is an anagram of speech – *Rede*).⁵ This is the origin of the extreme literality of this poetry; its response to the catastrophic event: an event that is marked by the absence of shape and size. Along these lines, this poetry is utterly immediate and non-metaphorical. It is a collage of rubble and ruins. It is not by chance that the Hebrew *Schibboleth* is one of the key words in this poetry: *Schibboleth*

¹ FLUSSER, Vilém. *Bodenlos*. Uma autobiografia filosófica. São Paulo: Annablume, 2007, p. 232.

² FLUSSER, Vilém. *Von der Freiheit des Migranten*. Einsprüche gegen den Nationalismus. Bensheim: Bollmann, 1994, p. 19.

³ ROSENFELD, Anatol. Introdução. *Entre dois mundos*. Seleção e notas A. Rosenfeld, Jacó Guinsburg, Ruth Simis e Geraldo Gerson de Souza. São Paulo: Perspectiva, 1967, p. 6.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁵ WERNER, Uta. *Das Grab im Text*. Paul Celans Lyrik im Imaginationsraum der Geologie. In: BERG, Nicholas e outros (org.). *Sboab*. *Formen der Erinnerung*. München: Fink, 1996, p. 176.

means a password, a watchword for crossing borders.⁶ This is the theme and call of Celan's poetry.

With works linked to the Emigrant Ship, Leila Danziger is also fencing in the unbounded unspoken. Her narration is rooted in the wreckage of XX century catastrophes, a curatorship of remnants and runes. Paradoxically, similar to the work of Lasar Segall, an artist to whom she pays tribute in this exhibition, we see a certain "peace" (Friede) emanating from her works, a disturbing calm after the cataclysm. It is though we are looking at "sky-wrecks" lying on the earth, mentioned in the Celan poem that she cites and also commented on in an essay by Hans-Georg Gadamer: "With masts sung earthwards / the sky-wrecks drive. / Onto this woodsong / you hold fast with your teeth. / You are the songfast / pennant."⁷ As Gadamer noted on this poem about shipwrecks (another name for Modernity, mentioned above): "It is no longer help from heaven that is expected, but rather from the earth. All ships are wrecked, but the song is still sung."⁸ The poet is the one who clings to the "woodsong" with his teeth: this keeps his head above water. The poet also stands for all humankind here as well, notes Gadamer, with his hope lasting even after calamities, after the end of belief in religion or redemption. Indeed, Kafka already noted this in his own way, in a journal entry: "There are people who float, clinging to a pencil-drawn line. Float? A drowning man dreaming of salvation."⁹ A perfect self-portrait!

In Segall's work, particularly Pogrom (1937) and Emigrant Ship (1939–41), we see this calm but melancholy light that emanates from his characters. In Pogrom, women and children seem so they are already angels, sleeping in some impossible paradise beyond history, while in Emigrant Ship we can imagine two deities: Melancholy hand-in-hand with Hope. What is crossing the ocean are not passengers, but rather a whole world swept away by the Shoah, the entire Shtetl culture of Jewish villages in Eastern Europe that was shattered by the Nazis. In his engravings, Segall is more of a "historian", showing the different social classes on these ships, for example. In his paintings, he is a poet, portraying his world that was shattered by untrammelled violence. These passengers are plunged in a solemn silence: as in Pogrom, they are bodies representing an annihilated culture.

Leila Danziger constructs and assembles her mnemonic curatorships from the deep well of the forgotten, inscribing and translating her toponymic name and the history of her displacement in many different ways. An entire family with a recent history of immigration/exile carries with it this state of stupefaction caused by the ripaway, the rupture, the destruction of the "home". It is not by chance that her favorite supports include prints: she stamps, scribbles, duplicates, copies and dismantles books, cutting up documents and reassembling them. If our psyche is a storehouse of overlapping impressions that hide and sink into forgetfulness before vigorously reappearing, these works are also impressions that help gather and surround the marks of time.

⁶ DERRIDA, Jacques. *Schibboleth pour Paul Celan*. Paris: Galilée, 1986.

⁷ GADAMER, Hans Georg. *Quem sou eu, quem és tu?* Comentários sobre o ciclo de poemas Hausto-Cristal de Paul Celan. Trad. e apresentação de Raquel Abi-Sâmara. Rio de Janeiro: EdUERJ, 2005, p. 82.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

⁹ KAFKA, Franz. *Sonhos*. Trad. de Ricardo Ferreira. São Paulo: Iluminuras, 2003, p.140.

I have always identified with Leila's works, and our parallel histories certainly explain part of this elective affinity. Setting out from Hamburg, the Aurigny moored in Rio de Janeiro on December 24, 1935 with her father – fourteen-year-old Rolf Danziger – aboard. This was just one of the many ships that sailed to the Americas, saving thousands of Jews from the Nazi ovens. On August 17, 1939, while Segall was painting his picture of these vessels, my mother Edith landed in the Guanabara Bay, together with my grandparents, Hilde and Martin Seligmann. Issued in the Berlin suburb of Grünewald where she lived, my mother's German passport (always the same, she never managed to apply for another) indicated that she was born in London. By 1936, my grandparents were well aware that it would be impossible for a Jewish couple to have children in German territory. But after my mother was born, they made a point of returning to Nazi Germany, as my grandfather did not believe that regime would last long... Two stamps displaying the German eagle and a swastika on my mother's passport – issued on February 14, 1939 – offer undeniable proof that he was wrong.

My mother has happy memories of her journey to Brazil on the General Artigas, where she played with friends under the kindly but watchful eye of a nanny. Her first view of the Guanabara Bay was also an unforgettable moment for that three-year-old girl. In the family snaps of their trip (my grandfather was an excellent photographer), my mother is smiling like any small child. In her innocence, she frolicked on board a ship carrying – like a latter-day Ark crossing the Atlantic – a handful of fortunate survivors of the Holocaust.

Like the history of Unbehagen [discontent, homelessness], the history of modern times unfolds and may be narrated from countless vessels: the thousands of slavers carrying millions of Africans to the New World where they died in a brutal genocide by overwork; the French frigate *La Méduse* that sank on July 2, 1816 and whose crew of 146 souls was abandoned by the ship's officers, recorded in history thanks to the brilliance of Théodore Géricault in 1818. His *Raft of the Medusa* offers one of the most impressive constructions in the history of art, bearing witness to this harrowing modernity with its intrinsic violence. We could also mention the Titanic as a symbol of British colonial arrogance, but I prefer to recall the MS *St. Louis*, a German transatlantic liner that set sail from Hamburg for Havana May 1939. Its 937 passengers – almost all Jews attempting to flee the Nazi boot – were rejected by Cuba and the USA. Forced to return to Europe, it moored in Antwerp on June 17, with 254 passengers falling victim to the Third Reich, many of them dying in concentration camps.

But if history is not transformed into experience, it is stubbornly repeated. In early June 2018, Italy's Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of the Interior Matteo Salvini, who heads up the extreme-right Liga party, prevented the Aquarius rescue ship from landing in Italy, with 629 immigrants on board. Finally accepted by the Spanish Government, this is merely one of the hundreds of vessels drifting across the Mediterranean, which is slowly turning into a giant offshore cemetery at the gates of "civilized" Europe, well into the XXI century.

I look at the Immigration Service document with the passenger list for the General Artigas, which moored at the Port of Rio after twenty days at sea on August 17, 1939 – just fifteen days before the start of the World War II that blocked escape routes for Jews still trapped in the Reich.

Passenger N° 16 is my grandfather; his name is written as Georg Martin Israel Seligmann; my grandmother is listed as Hilde Anna Liese Sara Seligmann (née Marxheimer) and my mother is Edith Sara Seligmann. Both "Israel" and "Sara" were necessarily included in the names of German Jews, at the order of the Nazis. This appears in many other names on the list: Adolf Israel Cohn, Helda Sara Cohn, Heinrich Israel Schindler, Mina Sara Schindler, Herbert Israel Rosenthal, Else Sara Rosenthal, etc. Sonorous, these names provide as phantasmagoric images before my eyes, as I try to visualize the faces of these survivors. If it were not for the artistic research of Leila Danziger, my family would probably never have known of this list. And it is largely thanks to these artists of heritage and memorial (or unforgetting) that these lists are included and rewritten in our culture(s) of catastrophe(s).

I look back at the photographs of my mother on the General Artigas. She is playing at fishing, wrapped in a mattress, dressed up as a soldier (?) and having fun among other children, with older girls who seem to be watching over them. Scrutinizing the adults: I see my grandfather at 39 years of age, dressed in white and playing some form of bowls. In her mid-twenties, my grandmother is chatting in an elegant social circle. Back in Germany, a few of my relatives managed to survive in hiding throughout the entire war; my maternal great-grandparents fled to Belgium, but were caught and sent to Auschwitz. This is a strange and tragic tale of survivals and deaths, like these characters in the work of Segall, in *Pogrom* and *Emigrant Ship*, shifting between death and life. Otherwise, there is no absolute survival, as anyone living through experiences such as these must carry their share of the burden of death and their dead, handed down from generation to generation as a testament.

The art of Lasar Segall and Leila Danziger can trigger waves of memory in us that halt the flow of time. Gleaning shards of history, fragments of documents, copies of pictures, torn clippings and faded pages that she reassembles through her curatorship of heritage and erasure, Leila introduces a new order of time and space. She anarchives documents and images, allowing us to handle them. Like that child playing make-believe games on a ship (sometimes a soldier, a turtle or a fisherman), we feel that we can also grasp the past in order to build homes for ourselves that are less bleak and more comforting.