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Bom Fim, New Birobidzhan, and Centaurs: Brazilian Author Moacyr Scliar and Jewish Brazil

1 Introduction: Jewish Migration to Brazil and Life in Porto Alegre

The migration of Portuguese, Italian or even German immigrants to Brazil is widely researched and a commonplace of Brazilian self-understanding. In his book *The Roots of Brazil* (*Raízes do Brasil*, 1936), the historian and sociologist Sérgio Buarque de Holanda writes about the colonization process, mainly referring to the first Portuguese immigrants, whom he describes as adventurers. These adopted indigenous knowledge and customs¹ – including linguistic ones – even though Buarque de Holanda tries, in a certain way, to glorify the colonizing practices.

Less well known among the European migrants are the Ashkenazi families, mainly from the Western parts of Russia called Bessarabia, today part of the Ukraine and Moldovia, who fled the pogroms at the beginning of the 20th century. Those immigrants were sent, with financial support by the Jewish Colonization Association (JCA),² to Argentina and Brazil and settled in colonies in the south of Brazil.

For many immigrants, the Americas including Brazil were considered the Promised Land. After arriving at the port in Rio de Janeiro, they were sent to the less than expected fertile interior in the South of the country, to the colonies of Philipppson, a small town named after the Belgian vice-president of the JCA, Franz Philipppson, who was at the same time director of the Argentine and Rio Grande do Sul Railway Company.³ In Philipppson, the first settlers arrived in 1904.⁴ Later, from 1912, another colony was created: Quatro Irmãos. This also happened due to economic interests – the town was close to a railway line and forests. Every family

1 Sérgio Buarque de Holanda: *Raízes do Brasil*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras 2014, p. 28.

2 The JCA, founded in 1891, was a philanthropic organization, financed by baron Maurice de Hirsch, with the aim to provide land for Jewish families in the Americas.

3 Marie D. Blocker: *A criação de Numa clara manhã de abril de Marcos Iolovitch, no contexto histórico*. In: *WebMosaica. Revista do Instituto Cultural Judaico Marc Chagall*. 9, (2017), p. 31.

4 This included 66 to 88 persons, depending on the source. See Ida Gutfreind: *A atuação da Jewish Colonization Association no Rio Grande do Sul. A colônia Philipppson*. In: *WebMosaica. Revista do Instituto Cultural Judaico Marc Chagall*. 1, (2009), p. 110.

received 25 to 30 acres of land as well as cattle and had to live in wooden huts.⁵ Both colonies did not last very long though: Immigrants of the first generation usually did not speak Portuguese, were easily infected with diseases, had to struggle with numerous hurdles, or even surrendered to alcohol. Moreover, most of them had no experience in agriculture.⁶ Most of the first settlers then went afterwards, due to the aforementioned problems, to the cities of Santa Maria or Porto Alegre, where they mainly worked as traders, often called *klientelchiks* (peddlers who were selling merchandises in poor areas) or *gravatiniks* (people selling ties) – professions in which some of them have been already active before the migration.⁷ In 1915, only one third of the former number of inhabitants of Quatro Irmãos was still living there.⁸

Despite the many problems that the settlers had to confront, the Jewish immigration can still be considered a success for both the settlers as well as for Brazil, as Jeffrey Lesser points out:

The Eastern European Jewish colonists who settled in Brazil never amounted to more than a few thousand people, yet they played two critical roles. First, the mere existence of the agricultural colonies challenged images of Jews as exclusively and insidiously oriented toward finance and capital in urban areas. Furthermore, residents of the colonies committed themselves to life in Brazil. This challenged notions that Jews were a closed group, uninterested in becoming citizens of countries where they resided.⁹

Due to the relatively open immigration laws, Eastern European Jews after World War I settled primarily in the states of São Paulo, Rio Grande do Sul and Rio de Janeiro, especially in the big cities, where they reached a high level of economic success.¹⁰ While in the beginning many Jews worked mainly as mobile traders, soon they opened their first shops, as, for instance, furniture and textile shops. As Lesser points out, “an ever-increasing match between Eastern European eco-

5 Moacyr Scliar: *Caminhos da esperança. A presença judaica no Rio Grande do Sul. Pathways of Hope. The Jewish Presence in Rio Grande do Sul*. Porto Alegre: RioCell 1991, p. 70–71.

6 Poultry farming was supposed to be done, and wheat, potatoes, beans, corn and vegetables were supposed to be planted. See Ida Gutfreind: *A atuação da Jewish Colonization Association no Rio Grande do Sul*, p. 111.

7 Moacyr Scliar: *Caminhos da esperança*, p. 80.

8 Marie D. Blocker: *A criação de Numa clara manhã de abril de Marcos Iolovitch, no contexto histórico*, p. 33.

9 Jeffrey Lesser: *Welcoming the Undesirables. Brazil and the Jewish Question*. Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press 1995, p. 16.

10 Ibid., p. 19.

conomic skills and the demands of the Brazilian economy for commercial and industrial activity helped Jews rise to positions of economic security.”¹¹

In Porto Alegre, the Jewish life gained visibility. In 1910, the first Jewish school was founded. In 1915, the first ever Jewish newspaper of Brazil, called *Di Menshait*, was published in Porto Alegre, which, unfortunately, after only 6 issues, had to be discontinued.¹² In 1917 the *Centro Israelita* was established, since 1924 the synagogue is located in Henrique Dias Street, in the *Bom Fim* district. The district soon had a Jewish library, a theatre, societies, shops, a cemetery, and a butcher. If we look at the mixtures within the Jewish community, it is striking that already at that time, Jews from all parts of Europe met in the streets of Porto Alegre. As Moacyr Scliar describes in *The War in Bom Fim*, there was “someone from Poland, another from Lithuania, someone else from Galicia, and over there a group from Bessarabia.”¹³ Polish Jews immigrated mainly in the 1930s to Porto Alegre. In the end of 1930s the German Jews, who normally did not speak Yiddish, arrived. In *The War in Bom Fim*, even a Sephardic Jew, named Ely, turns up one day.¹⁴ But of course, at the time, the state Rio Grande do Sul has already been the location of different immigration waves, especially the ones by Germans and Italians. Now, the big cities were the hotspots of the different movements, where an inter- or transcultural exchange was going on.

In some of his famous and translated novels, of which I will scrutinize *The War in Bom Fim* (1972), *The One-Man Army* (1973), and, with another symbolic layer, in *The Centaur in the Garden* (1980), we can see how this exchange between European settlers, Africans and the indigenous population took place. All the main characters in the aforementioned novels, that were published during the military dictatorship in Brazil (1964–1985), are Jews who, or whose ancestors, migrated to Brazil. As Nelson Vieira states, Scliar questions “the myths of fixed cultural boundaries [and] demonstrates their flexibility, openness, and cultural ambiguity.”¹⁵ Here, I would like to focus on the inter- and transcultural aspects, the socio-economic situation of the migrants, and also on the culinary aspects of this specific Jewish-Brazilian hybridity. Additionally, the historical layer is marked through flashbacks, which

¹¹ Ibid., p. 20.

¹² Lucia Chermont: *Di Menscheit (A Humanidade), a primeira publicação em língua iídiche no Brasil*. In: <http://transfopressbrasil.franca.unesp.br/verbetes/di-menscheit-a-humanidade-a-primeira-publicacao-em-lingua-iddiche-no-brasil> [September 23, 2022].

¹³ Moacyr Scliar: *The War in Bom Fim*. Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press 2010, p. 115.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 64. This was the latest wave of Jews, who fled from the Nasser regime in the 1950s. See also: Moacyr Scliar: *Caminhos da esperança*, p. 100.

¹⁵ Nelson Vieira: *Jewish Voices in Brazilian Literature. A Prophetic Discourse of Alterity*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida 1995, p. 152.

show the transgenerational traumatic presence of the pogroms in actual events lived by the protagonists of the novels.

2 Scliar's Novels: War against Nazis, the Birobidzhan Model, and the Condition of Being a Centaur

As Moacyr Scliar (1937–2011), a second-generation immigrant, told in an interview, in his childhood he listened to the stories of adults, which were mainly about the life of migrants.¹⁶ Scliar, who also worked as a medical doctor and health physician, in many of his novels, covers the two generations of Jewish migration to Porto Alegre.¹⁷ He emphasizes the multiple perspectives, a typical position of estrangement, that every immigrant holds:

The immigrant is always a person who somehow does not completely fit into his new country. He sees reality with different eyes, the eyes of someone who has experienced another reality. The immigrant perceives everything anew. His expectations and critical abilities have not already been blunted by habit. He is able to notice in his new land things that those who were born there would never notice. His eyes are wide open for business opportunities, for example. He wants to survive, and, for this reason, he must compromise sometimes. But he is also very aware and extremely critical of social injustices. But the immigrant usually lacks a native command of the new language, and this deficiency limits his interventions in society.¹⁸

Scliar presents in the three novels, most strikingly and coherent in *The One-Man Army*, the different historical stages of Jews in the job market – from being a *gravatinik* on the streets of Porto Alegre (in the 1920s), to textile traders with their own shops (1930s and 40s), to the holders of the booming construction enterprises (1950s and 60s).

¹⁶ Moacyr Scliar/Cristina Ferreira-Pinto Bailey/Regina Zilberman: *Entrevista de Moacyr Scliar a Cristina Ferreira-Pinto Bailey e Regina Zilberman*. In: *Revista Iberoamericana* LXXVI, 230 (2010), p. 225.

¹⁷ As Joanna Moszczynska points out, the narrative context of Scliar's works is mostly situated between the migration phase and the acculturation phase, where the protagonists must live between different life worlds, the one of the past as well as the actual one in Brazil. See Joanna M. Moszczynska: *A memória da Destruição na escrita judaico-brasileira depois de 1985. Por uma literatura pós-Holocausto emergente no Brasil*. Berlin: Peter Lang 2022, p. 83.

¹⁸ Moacyr Scliar/Luciana Camargo Namorato: WLT Interview with Moacyr Scliar. In: *World Literature Today* 80, 3 (2006), p. 42.

The above-mentioned themes of Jewish migration are recurrent in Scliar's novels. Often, we can see repetitions or reconfigurations in the biographical background of his characters, passages he quotes from his own works or even direct quotations from other books, as for instance the autobiographical novel *On a clear April morning*, by Marcos Iolovitch.¹⁹ In many cases, we could even consider these texts variations of the same themes. Although there exist many repetitions, each novel presents a new perspective on interactions among different ethnic groups. In *The War in Bom Fim*, for example, Scliar, in addition to the theme of German immigrant Nazis, also uncovers the African subtext of some Porto Alegre districts (for example, former *Colônia Africana*, which is called *Rio Branco* today and almost free of black population). In other texts, it is also the question of the indigenous populations of Brazil that gains weight, as in *A majestade do Xingu* (*Majesty of the Xingu*, 1997), for example, in which Noel Nutels, a Jewish physician (who really existed and actually migrated to Brazil from the Ukraine), cures indigenous people in Brazil from tuberculosis and vaccinates them against smallpox.

Moacyr Scliar's *Enigmas da culpa*, which is dedicated to the question of guilt from a discourse-analytical, i.e. psychological, religious, legal, medical, and literary perspective, begins with a case history, namely his own and the one of his ancestors:

Which begins in the forties in Porto Alegre, a small, provincial city, whose neighbourhoods had a characteristic profile. Bom Fim, the setting of our case study, was considered a Jewish neighbourhood. It was not entirely Jewish, obviously, but there were a large number of Jewish families living there. Our parents were immigrants, generally from Russia (mainly from the region known as Bessarabia) and Poland, where the Jews had lived, in lyrical misery, in the small villages to which the tsarist government had confined them.²⁰

The life-centre of the Jewish migrants is the Bom Fim neighbourhood in Porto Alegre, where, according to Scliar, the Jews in the 1930s and 40s formed an open society – the street was considered a common centre, much like in the former Jewish *shtetl*. Scliar conceives of it as an idyllic and familiar, and above all public space, characterized by social cohesion and openness. Scliar, as he says, turned to be a writer on the pavements of Bom Fim, where the people were sitting and where the stories were told in public. The doors and windows were always open.²¹ Al-

19 Marcos Iolovitch: *On a clear April morning. A jewish journey*. Boston: Academic Study Press 2020. Scliar refers indirectly to Iolovitch's novel in *A majestade do Xingu* (Moacyr Scliar: *A majestade do Xingu*. São Paulo 2009, p. 14–15). We can find direct quotations for example in *The War in Bom Fim* (Moacyr Scliar: *The War in Bom Fim* 2010, p. 8), and in *Enigmas da Culpa* (Moacyr Scliar: *Enigmas da culpa*. Rio de Janeiro: Objetiva 2007, p. 13).

20 Moacyr Scliar: *Enigmas da culpa*. Rio de Janeiro: Objetiva 2007, p. 11. My own translation, R.S.

21 Ibid., p. 15. And Moacyr Scliar: *Caminhos da esperança*, p. 88.

though the districts were mainly Jewish, the streets functioned as a public space where life realities of different cultures were mixed.

Scliar's first novel even carries the name of the district in his title: *The War in Bom Fim* (*A guerra no Bom Fim*, 1972). In the narrative, Brazil is at war with Germany, the Nazis have advanced as far as the Bom Fim district due to the defeats on the other fronts. The Russian parents of Samuel, who speaks poor Portuguese, and works as a textile trader, had settled in Philipppson, but agricultural life failed. They then went to the Jewish district of the state capital Porto Alegre, which in the novel is considered a country. Joel and Nathan (who is able to fly), sons of Samuel, and his wife Shendl, successfully lead a group of Jews to fight against the Germans, along with Macumba, a boy with African origins. Right from the beginning, the Jews have to confront the antisemitism of the local German immigrants, who also live there. Even the incarnate Golem from Prague, more than three meters of height, later fights among the allies and alongside the brothers in the final battle. Even Nathan appears, flying at the sky, and playing the violin. Later on, Joel kills Hitler, when riding a tram. But some German "fifth column" immigrants, who fought together with the German Nazis, as for instance the soldier Ralf Schmidt, survive. Schmidt's family later eats Samuel's corpse for barbecue. Although they have won the war, the Jewish boys appear as tragic heroes. It seems that one of the inspirations for the novel was an incident that Scliar noticed in the 1930s in Porto Alegre, when „Brazilian Nationalists and Nazis [. . .] paraded throughout the town complete with uniforms and insignia“,²² probably members of Brazilian right-wing integralist-movement.

As we can see, the phantastic and oneiric are central elements of Scliar's narratives.²³ However, we can perceive a strong realistic setting, with many references to historic life of Brazilian Jews and their professions between the 1920s and 1950s, the districts and the streets they were living in, as well as their typical food. The novels are always accompanied by historical dates and refer to global historical events. *The War in Bom Fim* covers the years between 1943 and 1948, *The One-Man Army* between 1916 and 1970, and *The Centaur in the Garden* between 1935 and 1974. Further, it is also a greater Jewish, and maybe Eastern European context, which becomes visible in his novels. In his books, Jewish thinkers like Sigmund Freud (who appears in person in *The One-Man Army*), Franz Kafka, Walter Benjamin, Isaac Singer, Albert Einstein, Isaac Babel (who was executed by the NKVD, and whom he mentions in various of his texts), or Marc Chagall, play significant roles.

²² Moacyr Scliar: *Caminhos da esperança*, p. 96.

²³ Joanna M. Moszczynska: *A memória da Destruição na escrita judaico-brasileira depois de 1985*, p. 80.

At the centre of the novel *The One-Man Army*, (*O exército de um homem só*,²⁴ 1973), is the protagonist and leader of a small communist group, Mayer Guinzburg, or captain Birobidzhan, as he is called mockingly by the local population of the Bom Fim district. Captain Birobidzhan is named after the Siberian city and autonomous state of Birobidzhan, created by the Soviet Union in the 1930s to solve the rising Jewish quest for a nation state. The quixotesque Mayer Ginzburg wants to establish a new colony called New Birobidzhan, together with some animals, the Pig Companion, the Chicken Companion and the Goat Companion, as well as his comrades Leia and José Goldman, who soon retire from the project. The success of the Russian Revolution and books by Walt Whitman, Vladimir Mayakovsky, and Rosa Luxemburg continue to drive him. But the eccentric Mayer, who is constantly ridiculed by the others, as well as the communist life of the group remain caricatures. Mayer argues with his father, a practicing Jew, as for communism imported from Russia seems the greatest possible provocation for a traditional Jewish family. But Mayer, who is the talk of the town, pushes the communist centre forward, grows vegetables, and distances himself from his family. In his self-authored journal *The voice of New Birobidjan*, Mayer euphemistically to distortingly describes the political events of Europe, as well as on his farm. Later, the farm is set on fire, which reminds captain Birobidzhan of the pogroms of his ancestors: “He was weeping. He was weeping the way his grandfather had wept after the pogrom in Kishinev.”²⁵ Afterwards, he returns to his wife Leia and his kids and opens a company for construction works in the late 1950s – the third creative field of Jews after being mobile traders and textile traders.²⁶ In 1952, after the anti-Semitic doctors’ conspiracy invented by Stalin and the show trial of Rudolf Slansky in Czechoslovakia, Mayer’s relationship with the Soviet Union is finally reversed: “Mayer Guinzburg now hated Russia, that gigantic and cruel monster. When he thought of the tears he had shed for Stalingrad, of the devotion with which he had heard ‘Alexander Nevsky’, he blushed with shame. To see Russia’s name in the newspaper gave him heartburn. Russia was a liar, cynical, cowardly and treacherous.”²⁷ At the end, after

24 Which also became the name of a song by the famous rock-band *Engenheiros do Hawaii*, from Porto Alegre and thereby entered popular culture.

25 Moacyr Scliar: *The One-man army*. New York: Ballantine Books 1986, p. 69.

26 Moacyr Scliar: *Caminhos da esperança*, p. 84.

27 My own translation, R.S. Moacyr Scliar: *O exército de um homem só*. Porto Alegre: L&PM 2019, p. 113–114. Interestingly enough, for unknown reasons this part was actually not translated in the English version. See the original version: “Mayer Guinzburg agora odiava a Rússia, aquela megera gigantesca e cruel. Quando pensava nas lágrimas que derramara por Stalingrado, na devoção com que ouvira ‘Alexandre Nevsky’, chegava a corar de vergonha. Ver o nome da Rússia no jornal chegava a lhe dar azia. A Rússia era mentirosa, cínica, covarde e traiçoeira.” In the German translation, for example, this part has been preserved (Moacyr Scliar: *Die Ein-Mann-Armee*. Frankfurt am

a constant ideological zigzag, he then tries again to build the New Birobidzhan in an old people's home, which of course fails as well. In the novel, the tragic ideological interference between being a Jew and communist in Brazil at the same time is reflected through historical events (also ones that refer to Brazilian history), once as the protagonist's latent nostalgic yearning towards Russia and the admiration for the revolution is later converted to strong disgust.

As one can see, the pogroms always remain a fixed point in memory. In the early 20th century, the hostile atmosphere in Russia²⁸ led to various pogroms, as for example the above-mentioned Kishinev pogrom in 1903, with approximately 120 deaths and 500 injured. In all three novels, the pogroms are mentioned as a trans-generational trauma for the Russian Jews. The past and their Eastern-European origins arouse mixed feelings: "We left Russia in 1916, says Avram Guinzburg, Mayer's brother. We came by ship, and threw up a lot. . . and yet, to the best of my recollection, we were happy. Yes, happy. Father was sick and tired of Russia. And ever since the pogrom in Kishinev, Brazil had been constantly on his mind. True, Russia was the homeland of Scholem Aleichem and of many other great Jews, but to us it was hell."²⁹

In his text *Between the shtetl and the gulag: voices of Russian Judaism*, which is written in the second person singular, Scliar begins with an expression of mourning. The text treats the question of Jewish condition in Russia, or later the Soviet Union, during the centuries, from a rather personal perspective, calling Russia a distant homeland – and thereby putting the traumatic experience of the pogroms in a more ambivalent setting:

And because of the faces, Russia, faces that are familiar to me, that arouse emotions in me: the faces of my grandmother, of my mother, of my uncles. Faces with protruding cheeks, slanting eyes, with that pale smile that is characteristic of people who suffer. I speak to you cause of these faces, Russia, and also cause of childhood memories: my grandmother's copper samovar, where the tea that warmed our souls on the long nights of the gaucho winter came from. And I speak to you because of the stories I heard. And because of Trotsky, of

Main: Suhrkamp 2000). Scliar was the son of a family of communists. He explains his later admiration for the communism of the Soviet Union, as well as for the founding of the state of Israel in 1948 (as an overcoming the Holocaust), with his longing for justice. Later he called himself a Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist, who sings in Brazil the *Internationale* in Hebrew, and accepts the soviet communism as the one and only truth. But his own evaluation of the Soviet Union changes drastically with the Stalinist purges and his doctor's plot in 1952 with various Jewish victims and the later Anti-Jewish campaigns. See Moacyr Scliar: *Enigmas da culpa*, p. 27–32; 165–179.

²⁸ Marie D. Blocker: *A criação de Numa clara manhã de abril de Marcos Iolovitch, no contexto histórico*, p. 29 and Ida Gutfreund: *A atuação da Jewish Colonization Association no Rio Grande do Sul. A colônia Philippon*, p. 108.

²⁹ Moacyr Scliar: *The One-man army*. New York: Ballantine Books 1986, p. 9.

I. Babel, of Chagall, of Sholem Aleichem. Because of the films and the songs that made my young heart beat faster. And it is for love that I speak to you, Russia. For a love which is mixed with disappointment, if not anger. But love, yes. The love one feels for a distant homeland. And that we Jews have many distant homelands.³⁰

Also the family of Guedali Tartakovsky, protagonist of *The centaur in the Garden* (*O centauro no jardim*, 1980), fled from Russia to Brazil after the pogroms. Guedali is a Jew as well as a centaur, half human being, half a horse, who was born in the rural parts of Rio Grande do Sul, in Quatro Irmãos. The Tartakovskys are one of the last families who stayed in the colony, others already went to the big cities. Guedali's family is located between Jewish life (which is marked by the celebrations of *Shabbat*, and *Yom Kippur*, Jewish songs, and the practice of circumcision) and Brazilian culture. When he is born, his mother Rosa complains about his father's decision to have migrated to the other end of the world, leaving their homeland. Despite of the parent's first irritation about his body at his birth, his family accepts and protects him, but keeps him mainly hidden. Later, the family moves to Porto Alegre, to a district called Teresópolis, a bit further from the city centre, because of Guedali's necessity to hide. One day, Guedali flees and gallops south, striving for normality. In a circus he finds a temporary place for himself among human beings. Only after an operation by a Moroccan surgeon do he and his later wife Tita (who is also a centaur, but a *goy*), become human with only their hooves left, that later transform into small human feet. Later, he and Tita lead a normal life in São Paulo, together with a group of Jewish friends, where he finds consolation in Jewish faith. But still, despite the surgery and the return to his Jewish roots, Guedali does not feel complete.

In another interview, Moacyr Scliar underlines the image of the centaur as one of a tension between two identities, where "the centaur is a symbol of the double identity, characteristic of Jews in a country like Brazil. At home, you speak Yiddish, eat gefilte fish, and celebrate Shabbat. But in the streets, you have soccer,

30 My own translation, R.S. Moacyr Scliar: *Entre o shtetl e o gulag: vozes do Judaísmo Russo*. In: <https://www.moacyrscliar.com/textos/entre-o-shtetl-e-o-gulag-vozes-do-judaismo-russo/> [September 29, 2022]. In the original language: "E por causa de faces, Rússia, de faces que me são familiares, que despertam em mim emoções: as faces de minha avó, de minha mãe, de meus tios. Faces de males salientes, de olhos oblíquos, com aquele pálido sorriso característico dos povos que sofrem. Por estas faces te falo, Rússia, e também por lembranças da infância: o samovar de cobre de minha avó, de onde saía o chá que nos aquecia a alma nas longas noites do inverno gaúcho. E te falo por causa das histórias que ouvi. E por causa de Trotski, de I. Babel, de Chagall, de Sholem Aleichem. Por causa dos filmes e das canções que faziam bater mais forte o meu coração de jovem. E por amor que te falo, Rússia. Por um amor ao qual se misturam a decepção, quando não a raiva. Mas amor, sim. O amor que se sente por uma pátria distante. E que nos, judeus, temos muitas pátrias distantes."

samba, and Portuguese. After a while you feel like a centaur.”³¹ Guedali finds himself in an ongoing identity crisis, between his horseness and his Jewishness (which is also mirrored in his mother’s initial complaint about why Guedali didn’t find a Jewish wife), as well as between nature and culture. Even after the surgery, Guedali doesn’t trust his feet. In the game of opposites, none of the parts can be fully suppressed. As a result, the identity struggle can never come to an end. A part of Guedali will always be a horse, a marginalized being, a dislocated Jew: “I feel insecure. I am afraid of standing up. I fear that my legs won’t sustain me; the truth is that I still haven’t learned to trust them. Bipedes don’t have the same firmness as quadrupeds.”³²

3 Hybridization of Food

As the author Marcos Iolovitch describes in his documentary and autobiographical novel *On a clear April morning* (*Numa clara manhã de abril*, 1940), poor Jews from remote areas of Eastern Europe were lured to subtropical latitudes by colorful images and descriptions: Iolovitch mentions his father’s fascination with oranges, which were in short supply in Eastern Europe, but abundant in Brazil, and thus were even fed to pigs. The book starts with the following scenario:

On a clear April morning in the year 19- when the steppes had begun to turn green again upon the joyful entrance of Spring, there appeared scattered about in Zagradowka, a small and cheerful Russian village in the province of Kherson, beautiful brochures with colored illustrations describing the excellent climate, the fertile land, the rich and varied fauna, and the beautiful and exuberant flora, of a vast and far-away country of America, named – BRASIL where the ‘Jewish Colonization Association’, better known as the JCA, owner of a great parcel of land, called ‘Quatro Irmãos’, located in the municipality of Boa Vista do Erechim, in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, was offering homesteads on favorable terms to all those who wished to become farmers.³³

31 Judy Bolton-Fasman: *The centaur in the Garden by Moacyr Scliar*. In: *Yiddish Book Center*. August 2003. <https://web.archive.org/web/20140515223027/http://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/node/279>

32 Moacyr Scliar: *The centaur in the Garden*. Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press 2011, p. 5.

33 Marcos Iolovitch: *On a clear April morning. A jewish journey*, p. 1.

Iolovitch shows the different value of single oranges, comparing their preciousness in Eastern Europe with the multitude of them in Brazil. „Oranges in Russia were imported. They came packed in boxes and rolled in tissue paper like the apples from California here in Brazil. And they were very expensive.”³⁴

In the novel, the images of the orange depicted on the brochures served as a condensation of a wishful projection. The narrator describes the picture that was shown to the inhabitants of Zagradowka to look at their possible futures:

Even further back, blued in the distance, were coconuts, palms, and mysterious forests. And, in the foreground, highlighted in vivid and bold colors, was an enormous orchard, composed principally of orange trees; in their shade pigs ate the beautiful oranges that had fallen to the ground. This little picture impressed Papa profoundly.³⁵

In addition to local, natural products, it is worthwhile to look at the cultural practices and economic issues concerning food. In the novels by Scliar, culinary references often frame the narratives and establish links with the past. Due to a strong drive of overprotection caused by the pogroms, periods of famine and by the ubiquity of diseases like tuberculosis, as Scliar explains,³⁶ the Jewish mothers provided their sons with an over-abundance of food: Hot tea, „a nostalgic remembrance of old Russia“,³⁷ from the *samowar* with loads of sugar, *shtrudel*, *kneidlech* with lots of *schmaltz*, *borscht*, *gulasch*, *latkes*³⁸ and *tchulent*³⁹ mark the eastern European origin. Most of those dishes come from Eastern Europe and were brought to Brazil by the Jewish settlers. In *The War in Bom Fim* the *chimarrão* (the Brazilian term for *mate*) can be seen as a reference to the local gaúcho-culture, as well as to indigenous cultures, which is in the novel already decentred by Jewish practices: “Samuel and his neighbors were drinking bitter mate tea. Isaac drank the tea, sucking on honey drops. Samuel laughed, saying that a real Gaúcho drank his tea bitter.”⁴⁰ Also in the accounts of the first Jewish settlers in the south of Brazil, the consumption of the quite bitter *chimarrão* seemed to be a signal of the acceptance of the local culture⁴¹ – which is valid until today. The indigenous influences of Brazilian food culture, for example manioc, sweet potato, *pinhão* or *chimarrão*, mixed with African (as the national dish *feijoada*), Arab, Western European

³⁴ Ibid., p. 3.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 2.

³⁶ Moacyr Scliar: *Enigmas da culpa*, p. 18.

³⁷ Moacyr Scliar: *Caminhos da esperança*, p. 88.

³⁸ Which are small, fried slices of potatoes.

³⁹ A meat dish.

⁴⁰ Moacyr Scliar: *The War in Bom Fim*, p. 4.

⁴¹ Moacyr Scliar: *Caminhos da esperança*, p. 72.

(mainly Italian) or Eastern European elements is quite typical and symbolize the different migration movements, often combined on one plate. The concept of food as an identity marker in Brazil is quite a complex one. One of the most remarkable scenes happens when Nathan, in *The War in Bom Fim*, exchanges food with Macumba, a character of African descent:

One day he saw Macumba eating lunch and wanted to taste what was in the lunch pail. He liked the beans and rice and even more the cassava mush, which he devoured voraciously. From then on Macumba would give Nathan his lunch pail and would receive from Shendl a plate of good Jewish food. It was not without some sacrifice that he chewed the matzo that was left over from Pesach, but he liked the borscht, the beet soup he said looked like blood, the kneidlach and the gefilte fish. He would take the latkes home to his kids.⁴²

It is obvious, that food serves a symbolic status of identity, mutual recognition, and economic currency, even replacing words – Nathan and Macumba do not even talk to each other during their encounter. But while his mother Shendl refuses the presence of Macumba, the second-generation immigrant Nathan tries to get closer in contact with the other. Macumba even helps Joel fighting in the battles against the Nazis and gives him advice.

As the space in Scliar's novels seems an open one, even the culinary practices are open to negotiation, hybridization, and exchange. Being a Jew in Brazil means being a Brazilian Jew, with all its negotiations and interactions in the different life-spheres, and an emphasis on both parts. Especially in the field of food, many words in his novels are written in Yiddish or Eastern European languages, as, for instance, *samowar*, *shtrudel*, *kneidlech*, *gefilte fish*, *gulasch*, *borscht*, *tchulent* or *latkes*, which also makes Scliar a preserver of the memories of a minority culture in a wider Brazilian context. Food, of course, can also have a potential for rebellion though. The protagonist Mayer in *The One-Man Army*, for example, is described as extremely skinny. His mother tries to make meat appealing to him while he recuses all the Jewish food.⁴³ Later, and as a sort of provocation, he demands pork meat, an animal which is considered impure – a symbolic act of rebellion.

In all three novels we can observe a strong juxtaposition between realistic and fantastic as well as hyperbolic elements, when dealing with the cultural hybridity of the protagonists. Even though Scliar is considered a writer of fantastic literature, we can find strong realistic elements in the descriptions of the life world and the socio-economic situation of the protagonists, as well as culinary aspects. While the Jewish protagonists in *The War in Bom Fim* are, though in a

⁴² Moacyr Scliar: *The War in Bom Fim*, p. 31.

⁴³ Moacyr Scliar: *The One-man army*, p. 11–13.

fantastic setting, mainly described as heroic, the other novels show above all outsiders, marked by a deviant ideology and/or bodily constitution. According to Nelson Vieira, Scliar's fiction "reinterpretes Brazil's social mores and myths using the perspective of the outsider within."⁴⁴ In *The Centaur in the Garden*, though, we can find an overdetermined situation of an identity crisis which, as gets clearer, will never resolve completely. But still, the larmoyant voice in the beginning becomes more confident.

⁴⁴ Nelson Vieira: *Jewish Voices in Brazilian Literature. A Prophetic Discourse of Alterity*, p. 182–183.

