

Bad People. Anti-Semitism in South America -- widespread and rarely explored

02/01/2009 | Klaus Hart

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a recently published Brazilian anthology* that describes the phenomenon

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Many Latin Americans carry official first names like Hitler, Himmler

and Eichmann. In the phonebook of Sao Paulo one can find, in all

seriousness, the name "Himmler Hitler Göring Ferreira Santos."

Again and again synagogues are attacked; the number of anti-Semitic and

neo-Nazi websites has increased alarmingly; Jewish personalities often

receive death threats. For the first time now, an anthology of 740

pages is available, in which experts approach the phenomenon of hatred

against Jews in North and South America from different angles. Editor

and co-contributor of the anthology is Latin America's leading

anti-Semitism researcher, Maria Luiza Tucci Carneiro, who has already

published numerous books on the topic. Carneiro teaches at the

University of Sao Paulo and is currently building a virtual archive

about the Holocaust and anti-Semitism in cooperation with the Yad

Vashem Institute in Jerusalem. In addition, she develops urgently needed educational materials for Brazil's teachers — materials that should have been available for decades.

The anthology describes anti-Semitism in Canada and the United States as insignificant and hardly threatening, hence it is considered in relative brevity, quite unlike the giant country of Brazil and its neighbor, Argentina, that have the largest Jewish communities in Latin America and are increasingly exposed to neo-Nazism and anti-Semitism.

One can't help being reminded of the bomb attack on the Jewish Community Center in Buenos Aires in 1994, in which 85 people were killed. This attack and other incidents lead to harsh security measures at synagogues, also in Brazil. Brazilian rabbis insist that the Iberian culture is still marked by strong anti-Semitism, and that Spain and

Portugal who colonized the Latin American countries, deeply instilled

Christian anti-Judaism as well as racist anti-Semitism, with all its stereotypes and prejudices in South American society.

A Luxury Edition of "Mein Kampf"

Maria Luiza Tucci Carneiro states that today, anti-Semitism in Brazil and other North and South American countries usually disguises itself as anti-Zionism, as hatred of Israel. "But if one looks closely, it goes against the Jews, it is nothing else but deep-seated, traditional anti-Semitism." Especially in Brazil, Argentina and Chile, the anti-Jewish mentality is strong and articulates itself politically.

Anti-Semitic concoctions from the Nazi era are appearing in new editions. In Brazil itself the translation of Hitler's *Mein Kampf* in a luxury edition is selling out quickly. Since the 19th Century the major

racial theories from Germany and France were adopted in Brazil by government circles and propagated by renowned intellectuals. "One wanted a pure race — white, Catholic and non-Jewish."

The anthology contains an astonishing study by the historian Silvia

Cortez Silva about an icon of Brazilian culture, the writer Gilberto

Freyre, whose 100th Birthday in 2000 had been celebrated with official

pomp. In his lifetime Freyre had already been honored by many great

universities of the world — although in his classic *Casa-Grande &*

Senzala, ["The Mansion and the Slavehut"] he had spread the most evil

prejudices against Jews. Silva writes that Gilberto Freyre never

concealed what he was thinking about the Jews. "The way he describes

the profile and identity of Jews could not be more anti-Semitic." He

uses expressions and attributes such as blood sucker, parasite,

exploiter, ruthlessness, cunning, Jewish nose, vulture-face — to name

only a few. Silva underlined as particularly interesting that such

writing passed unheeded in the long years of its reception.

Anti-Semitic views are still popular in Latin America. In some

Brazilian dictionaries of foreign words the word "Jew" is, in all

seriousness, translated as "bad person." Even officially, the dictator

and hater of Jews, Getúlio Vargas, is still celebrated as the greatest

statesman in the national history of Brazil, though, since 1936, he had

outlawed the issuance of entry visas to persecuted Jews by secret

decree. "We know of about 10 000 rejected visa applications — and

there are still a lot more," states Carneiro. But even worse, many

Brazilian Jews were deported to Nazi-Germany.

Hundreds of War Criminals

The researcher has many anonymous letters of Brazilians with no German background, who denounced Jews who had escaped into the tropical land.

"Brazil cooperated in the destruction of the Jews; the Vargas government was complicit in the Holocaust — and Brazilians should

finally realize this." Vargas supported the spread of the Nazi Party

(the NSDAP) and let Nazi instructors into the country, who

indoctrinated students in German schools. "Heil Hitler" was used as

salutation. SA and SS songs were sung. In no country outside Germany,

did the Nazi Party attract more members than in Brazil. Schools, city

squares, streets and even the Plenary Hall of the Brazilian National

Congress in Brasilia are named after Filinto Müller, the

notorious head torturer, chief of the political police of Vargas.

Rather late, in 1942, the dictator Vargas broke with Nazi Germany, in

order not to remain on the losing side of WW II, also under pressure

from the United States; he then even declared war against Germany. In

the anti-Semitic Argentina the Nazi collaborator Juan Domingo Peron,

even today still no less popular than Vargas, took his time and broke

with Nazi Germany just four weeks before Germany's capitulation. How

after 1945, he permitted the organized entry of hundreds of war

criminals into the country, is well documented and well known.

Even after the war, anti-Semitic policies were continued in Brazil.

Carneiro describes in her classic *O Antisemitismo na Era Vargas* how,

even in 1949, Jews were again denied entry visas by secret decree with

the argument that these Jews are survivors of the camps, mentally

disturbed people, in whom Brazil has no interest. Brazil's people of

German descent played no small role in this. Thousands of them shared

the Nazi enthusiasm, went to Germany, took part in war and destruction

of the Jews and returned to Brazil unshorn after 1945, where they continued to cultivate Nazi improprieties. Only now, much too late, one tries to track these people down. Maria Luiza Tucci Carneiro accuses Latin American intellectuals, including the Portuguese winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature José Saramago, of promoting a new anti-Semitism by comparing the actions of Israel against the Palestinians with the Holocaust, which is absurd, and she observes that Brazil's government is much more pro-Arabic than pro-Israel.

The Case of Stefan Zweig

But had the great Jewish writer, Stefan Zweig, not found refuge in Brazil even under dictator Getúlio Vargas? Of course, in order to give the appearance of an unprejudiced, anti-racist nation, certain Jews were allowed into the country: Those that had deposited a high

amount of money at the Banco do Brasil, or those from whose image the

nation would benefit. The Jewish journalist and biographer of Stefan

Zweig, Alberto Dines, revealed the background: "This visa was a

precious thing for every Jew who wanted to escape from Europe. And

Stefan Zweig just made a deal with the Vargas government — he wrote a

book in favor of Brazil in exchange for a permanent visa and received

this with incredible ease. Zweig was not a politicized man, he closed

his eyes to many things. He invented a paradise." The book, *Brazil — A*

Country of the Future, while totally out of touch with reality, is

still a world bestseller, curiously enough, a classic of Brazilian

literature. Of course, not a word can be found about the atrocious

Brazilian anti-Semitism under the dictator Vargas.

*) Luiza Tucci Carneiro: O

Antisemitismo nas Americas. Editora da Universidade de São Paulo, 2008.

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Translated from the German by Fritz Voll.