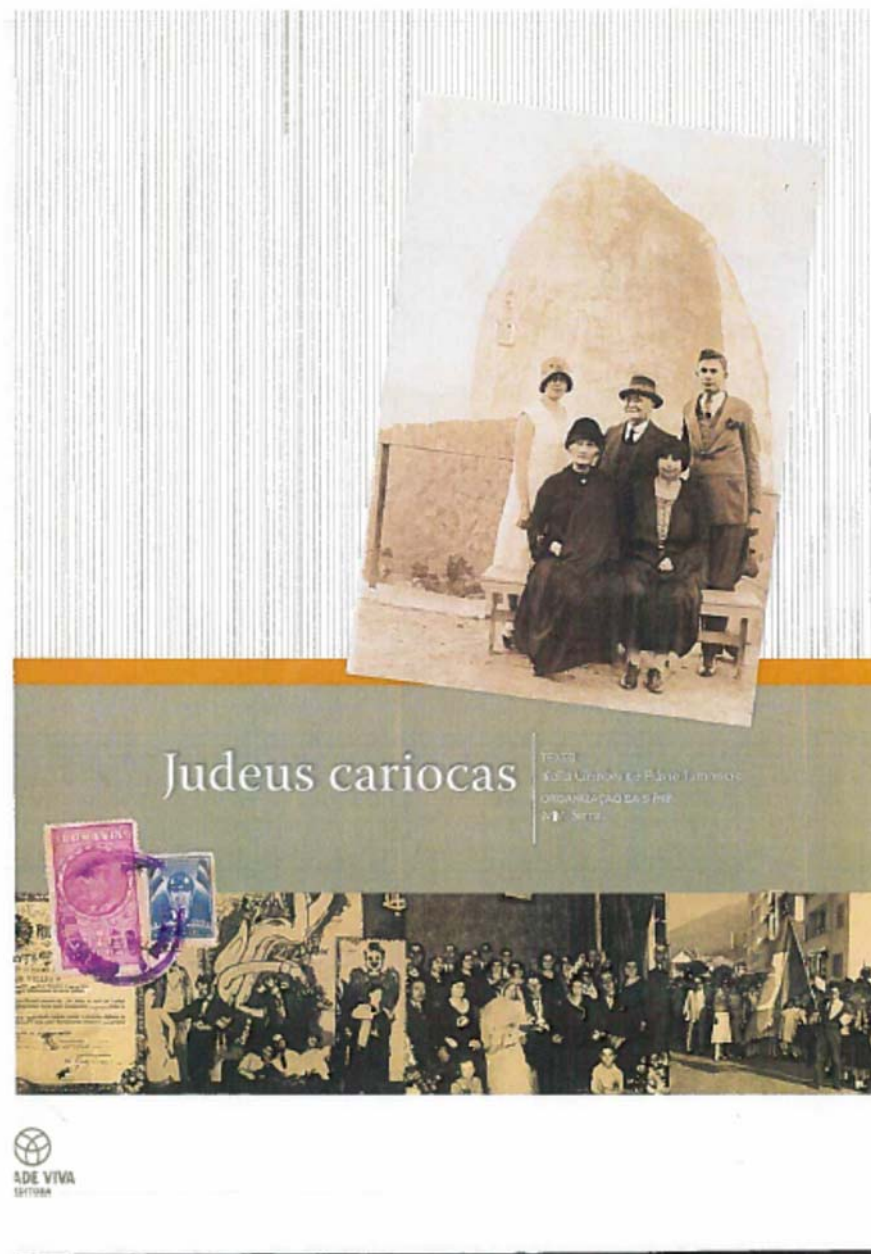


The Carioca<sup>1</sup> Jews

Book authored by

Keila Grinberg, Flávio Limoncic, M.V. Serra and Zevi Ghivelder

Editora Cidade Viva, Série Imigrantes no Rio de Janeiro, Volume 2, 2010, ISBN 978-85-63437-03-7



<sup>1</sup> Carioca is the term used to designate those that are born in the city of Rio de Janeiro.

Foreword<sup>2</sup> by

Jerson Kelman

CEO of Light<sup>3</sup>

This is a nice book, full of interesting information about the recent history of Rio de Janeiro. The authors interviewed ten Carioca Jews to compile curious aspects of the ambience in which the Jewish immigrants from various parts of the world and their descendants have been living.

As CEO of Light, I should produce a neutral text, without emotion, just explaining that the story of Light intertwines with the history of various communities of immigrants who found in Rio a good place to work, prosper, live in harmony and provide their children and grandchildren the chance of a good life. That is the reason that motivated Light and the Secretary of State for Culture to edit books like "From father to son - Portuguese immigrants in Rio de Janeiro" (the first book of the series) and now this equally well-done "Carioca Jews." However, in this particular case, I prefer to give a personal testimony.

I did not have religious training. When I was a child, my family went to the Great Temple in downtown Rio only on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Just after bar mitzvah, I became interested in the religious aspects of Judaism, but soon I abandoned this option of "preserving the Jewish heritage" due to lack of conviction in the axioms that support faith, no matter which religion.

When I was 15 or 16, I realized that God had not created man in his image and likeness. On the contrary, God was a human creation. God's mood swings, described in the Bible - sometimes a severe father, sometimes a comprehensive dad – just mirrors the human diversity. Adopting what seemed to me as a "scientific approach", I decided to put the hypothesis of nonexistence of God to the test.

On the day of Yom Kippur - the holiest day of the Jewish calendar - when Jews should devote themselves to prayers and endure a 24-hour fast that precludes the ingestion of anything, including water, I went to swim in the Copacabana beach. The flag was red, indicating dangerous waves. Despite being a mediocre swimmer, I stepped into the sea and there I stayed for a long time, some 50 meters from firm ground, moving up and down with the scaring waves. I thought that if God exists, this would be an excellent opportunity to inflict me an exemplary punishment.

Fortunately, I came out unscathed from the bravado. Of course, the experience was inconclusive. At one hand, the lack of punishment could mean that God doesn't exist. On the other, it could mean that God exists and, being good, tolerates the bravado of a young Jew. Alternatively, it could mean that He exists but doesn't like to take care of 9 billion souls.

The objective of the "experience" was not only to test the existence of God, but also to enlighten my relationship with Judaism. If God doesn't exist, then the long chain of martyrdom, culminating in the Nazi genocide, would simply be a tragic mistake. I could relieve the heavy Jewish heritage from my shoulders.

---

<sup>2</sup> This is the translation performed in 2016 of the original foreword, written in Portuguese, in 2010. The 2010 published version, in Portuguese, was abridged. It doesn't contain the description of the Copacabana swimming "experience".

<sup>3</sup> Light is the power company of Rio de Janeiro.

In childhood and youth, I felt that I had narrowly escaped tragedy. As if from time to time, fate would randomly throw a dart to hit a particular community and generation of Jews. The last and most devastating of these darts hit Europe and the generation of my parents, who were unhurt because, decades earlier, my grandparents and great-grandparents immigrated to Brazil.

Considering that uncountable Jewish generations have been in error was a shocking thought. Of course, even if I were right, this would not offset the great Jewish legacy to humankind. Like, for example, valuing knowledge, exercising social solidarity and preserving the family. However, other human groups absorbed these attributes or created similar ones on their own. In other words, these values became universal. I remember thinking that what had remained as specifically Jewish would be of lesser relevance.

Although I was ready to consider my Jewish condition unimportant, I felt bad about it, as if this would mean the rejection of my roots. Definitely, this was not the case. Therefore, I decided to look for other ways of "being a Jew".

Because religion didn't attract me, I turned to Zionism. It must have contributed to this move the strong pro-Israel sentiment of my parents. I joined a Zionist-socialist youth movement, the Irgun Magen Yehuda (IMY). Although it was an organization set up in Rio de Janeiro, it followed the systematic performance of European youth organizations of the 1930s. It offered up to teenagers the comfort of "belonging" to a fellowship endowed with a relevant historical mission. In the case of IMY, this mission was to immigrate to Israel and build a socialist society. Something along the lines of extending the concept of the kibbutz to the urban environment. A few decades later, this mission seems bizarre. However, at the time, in a biological phase in which youngsters leave the family nest, it did appear as an appealing cause.

Although I didn't stay long in IMY, this was a very important experience in my life. It was there that I met Celeste, with whom I have been married for 40 years. It was there that I acquired an idyllic vision of a socialist world with less inequality and more solidarity. A view that, although tempered over the decades by successive historical disappointments and a better knowledge of human nature, never ceased to guide my ethical attitudes.

At the University, I realized that it made more sense to work for socialism in Brazil than in Israel. However, I have been following the Israeli's society quest to build a democratic nation immersed in a sea of hostility. In 1982, after the war between Israel and the Palestinian forces based in Lebanon, I wrote my first article published in the Brazilian press entitled "Palestinian state is the only way out for Israel".

Shortly after graduation, I abandoned the idea of socialist revolution and limited my interest on Judaism to the historical aspects. However, along all these years, thanks to Celeste's efforts, we have conserved the most traditional aspects of religion, such as brit milah and bar mitzvah of our children and grandchildren. A month ago, at the brit milah of our fifth grandchild, finally I accepted her old aspiration to have a mezuzah at the door entrance of our apartment.

Like most of the ten respondents that were interviewed in the book, I never experienced any embarrassment related from my Jewishness. I think Brazil is world champion in harmony between communities of different origins. For example, it is almost folkloric the peaceful coexistence between Jewish and Arab traders in the Sahara, a trade zone of Rio, located near the Light's headquarters. This is so not only because Brazil was for many decades a country of

immigrants. The United States also was. Brazil is a peaceful melting pot because, among other reasons, the Portuguese colonizers were sympathetic to miscegenation.

I would thank my grandparents, if they were alive, the decision to leave Bessarabia (now Moldova) and go to a land that, according to a famous Brazilian song, “is blessed by God and beautiful by nature”.

Rio de Janeiro, 2010