

Introduction

My name is Jeffrey Lesser and I am the director of the Tam Institute for Jewish Studies at Emory University and a specialist on Brazil. Welcome to the Athen's Jewish Film Festival's presentation of Brazil's 2007 Oscar nominee, "The Year My Parents Went on Vacation."

"The Year My Parents Went on Vacation" tells the story of a young boy whose parents, members of a group fighting against Brazil's brutal dictatorship in 1970, must go into hiding and leave him behind for his own safety. They decide to drop him off with his grandfather, an orthodox Jew who lives in Bom Retiro, São Paulo's so-called Jewish neighborhood. Not surprisingly for a Brazilian film, much of the action takes place during the World Cup which was won in 1970 by Brazil, led by the brilliant Pele.

As you watch the film I ask that you to keep a number of points in mind. First, the Jewish life you see represented is a much different one than in the United States. Here Jewish immigration began in force in the mid-19th century from Central Europe and was followed in the late 19th and early 20th century as Eastern European Jews, notably the Russian Empire, arrived. Large scale Jewish immigration to Brazil, on the other hand, only began in the 1920's, just when the National Origins Acts sought to limit Jewish entry into the United States. Thus the Jews you see represented in this film are primarily of Polish and Lithuanian and Hungarian origin and have arrived in Brazil after World War I and the Russian Revolution. This late entry helps us to understand the generational conflict that is so present in the film – in the US, the tensions between US born Jews and their immigrant parents took place in first half of the twentieth century, but in Brazil it only happened in the 1960's and 1970's.

The film quite accurately portrays the horror inflicted on the population by Brazil's military rulers, a thuggish group which came to power in 1964 supported by the United States. The dictators used torture and murder to repress the rights of all civilians and you will notice how many characters in the film are constantly being watched by shadowy figures pretending to be students or civilians. Brazilian born Jews, here represented by the young boy Mauro's father, often had to make hard decisions about the right path to follow during the dictatorship. Indeed, this film could as easily have been made about the children of Japanese, Syrian and Lebanese immigrants who, together with Jews, were both critical actors in the fight against the military regime and important collaborators with it.

Finally let me mention the setting, the neighborhood of Bom Retiro where I have spent a great deal of time over the last twenty years. While on the surface this seems to be a "Jewish" neighborhood, the multi-ethnicity of the city of São Paulo is apparent on every corner and in every relationship. This is particularly noticeable in the scenes with futebol – soccer – which is played on the streets, in neighborhood clubs, and of course on television as Brazilians of all ethnicities and religious faiths cheer for the World Cup. Futebol in this film is a metaphor for everything: childhood, national identity, ethnic solidarity and inter-ethnic relations and, most importantly, freedom from oppression. I know you will enjoy this wonderful film

DISCUSSION

I hope you enjoyed the film – in order to get our conversation started I wanted to point out a few things that jumped out at me as I watched the movie.

1) The film quite accurately portrays the horror inflicted on the population by Brazil's military rulers, a thuggish group which came to power in 1964 supported by the United States. The dictators used torture and murder to repress the rights of all civilians and you will notice how many characters in the film are constantly being watched by shadowy figures pretending to be students or civilians. Brazilian born Jews, here represented by the young boy Mauro's father, often had to make hard decisions about the right path to follow during the dictatorship. Indeed, this film could as easily have been made about the children of Japanese, Syrian and Lebanese immigrants who, together with Jews, were both critical actors in the fight against the military regime and important collaborators with it.

--- That said, in a way the film portrays the dictatorship as cordial and in that sense it is very Brazilian in being polite and non-direct. At end of Dictatorship was an amnesty for everyone so on the one hand you see the dictatorship as cruel but you also get the idea that the rabbi can negotiate the mom's release to be with the child

2) The idea of racial democracy. Many Brazilians believe that Brazil is uniquely free of racism even though it has as much racism as all other countries in the Americas. The difference between the US and Brazil is the idea that people speak openly about mixture as "good" even if they do not practice it. We see this clearly when the boy says that he wants to grow up to be a black goalie. We also see it clearly in the idea that the Afro-Brazilian goalie is part of the Jewish team and that the "Jewish" neighborhood also has lots of different types.

-- It is not an accident that almost all the scenes of multi-ethnicity involve soccer— which is played on the streets, in neighborhood clubs, and of course on television as Brazilians of all ethnicities and religious faiths cheer for the World Cup which was won in 1970 by Brazil, led by the brilliant Pele. Futebol in this film is a metaphor for everything: childhood, national identity, ethnic solidarity and inter-ethnic relations and freedom from oppression.

3) Even though there is an idea of racial mixture, in the last twenty years the idea of ethnic pluralism has become strong in Brazil. The film represents this clearly by unapologetically showing a Jewish-Brazilian world where not everyone is mixed – indeed, it is a radical film in that it shows the young generation as all of one ethnic group – this is different from many "ethnic" films in Brazil in which the youth are shown as the mixed generation, different from the parents. Here the grandparents are not intermarried, the parents are, and the children are part of a Jewish-Brazilian world.

-- I found it interesting that the press booklet makes particular note that the actor who plays Mauro goes to a Jewish School and that his mother is a Catholic convert to Judaism. In the racial democracy formulation it would tell the story of a Jewish father and Catholic mother whose child was simply Brazilian.

4) The director of this movie is part of a family that I know well. He himself comes from a German-Jewish background (both his parents came to Brazil in the late thirties) and thus the world he portrays, of Eastern European Jewry, was unfamiliar to him. Indeed the Jewish life represented is a much different one than in the United States. Here Jewish immigration began in force in the mid-19th century from Central Europe and was followed in the late 19th and early 20th century as Eastern European Jews, notably the Russian Empire, arrived. Large scale Jewish immigration to Brazil, on the other hand, only began in the 1920's, just when the National Origins Acts sought to limit Jewish

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5) Finally let me mention the setting, the neighborhood of Bom Retiro where I have spent a great deal of time over the last twenty years. Today, if you were to go there you would find that most of the residents are Korean and in that sense this neighborhood repeats itself as a location for immigrants. One of the fascinating current issues in the neighborhood has to do with the large number of Korean-Brazilians who attend the local Jewish School which is the best in the neighborhood – for the last few years the winner of the “Best Hebrew Speaker” prize has been a Brazilian of Korean descent and this suggests that some of the ethnic themes broached in the film continue today under democracy.