Immigration and Memory

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The town of Nova Friburgo, in Brazil, was founded in 1820 by Swiss immigrants who, as often happens in the majority of migratory flows, crossed the ocean in search of better life conditions. The scope of this paper is to trail the path of a Swiss immigrant called Marianne Joset Salusse and then follow on to investigate the mechanisms involved in elaborating family memory and public memory around this woman who would become a symbol of immigration to this town. Thus a series of interviews were held with her descendants, which were fundamental for the understanding of current representations and the main elements which constitute the collective memory around Marianne. Besides oral sources, we had recourse to written documents which allowed a retrieval of relevant information about her life. More than simply adding information, written sources allowed for a more profound analysis of oral accounts, unravelling as well as unveiling selective procedures peculiar to memory construction (Pollak, 1989;1992).

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In July of 1819, Marianne Joset, then 13 years old, left a hamlet in Switzerland with less than 500 inhabitants, together with her father, Joseph Joset, her mother, Marie Françoise Bandelier, and her brother Joseph, and undertook a long sea journey to the port of Rio de Janeiro. The Joset family was part of a group of approximately two thousand swiss who, pressed by the economic crisis that ravaged their native land, decided to try a new life in a distant country. As from 1808 Brazil harboured the Portuguese Court fleeing Napoleon’s offensive, and became then the actual seat of the United Kingdom of Brazil, Portugal and Algarves. The aim of King D. João VI in financing the coming of the swiss was to create a colony that would produce staple foodstuffs in the proximity of the Court. Financed European immigration -- something unheard of until then -- would be an experiment in the employment of free labour in an age when slave-trade was already internationally frowned upon.

1. Family memory or the “Grand Maman” saga

Marianne’s history is told by her descendants as a saga in which certain elements are made to stand out, whilst so many others are obliterated. The point in question is then to ask ourselves about the form by which this selectivity expresses itself in the constitution of a family memory which would eventually become part of the town’s memory, considering that Marianne came to represent the model of a swiss immigrant. We have then to ask ourselves which were the elements enhanced, which were suppressed, and why.
The descendants of Marianne, so called “Grand Maman”, elected her as the central figure of the family, mainly because of her industriousness. Beatriz Veiga’s testimony is an example: “Marianne Salusse was a bulwark of the family. And everybody considered her as such. Grand-Maman’s power was enormous.” Or according to Walter Neves: “Since Friburgo’s foundation she was an outstanding figure.”

The saga as told by her descendants begins very dramatically by the tragic loss of her parents and brother during the trip, and her arrival as an orphan, all alone, in a strange land. However, the finding of registers dated from 1827 at the Memory Center of the City Hall of Nova Friburgo, gave us access to the information that Joseph Joset, Marianne’s father, had not died during the journey. This does not imply in an underestimation of the difficult conditions faced during the sea journey, and least of all of the loss of her mother and brother, who cannot be ascertained to have died on board or already on firm ground. In any case, we can distinguish an aspect of Marianne’s history that has been especially valued, that is, her situation as an orphan in a faraway country. The father’s presence -- undoubtedly for the first seven years, at least -- was totally suppressed, reinforcing Marianne’s image of a very brave girl.

Following the trail of family narrative, soon after we run into another silence over a crucial moment in Marianne’s trajectory: her marriage. Generally speaking, in regard to family memory, marriages, the birth of a new member or the death of a relative are narrative breaches, symbolic and significant milestones, equivalent in the History of societies to events such as wars, for instance (Fausto, 1997). We found out that, in 1830, when the marriage between Marianne Joset and Guillaume Salusse was celebrated in the church of Nova Friburgo, the first two sons of the couple,
Josephina and Pedro Eduardo, were registered at the very same time. This “non utterance” present in the accounts of descendants emphasizes another aspect valued by the family nucleus -- traditional Catholic and social mores. Marianne’s image was not to be in any way associated with the breaking of the implicit social rule that couples should not have children before being married in church.

Another point in which accounts diverge from written documents involves the origin of a business venture responsible for the family’s social ascent: the Hotel Salusse. According to the family’s oral tradition, the hotel was founded thanks to Marianne who, tired of receiving her husband’s friends as guests in her home, had the idea of charging them daily rates. However, it was ascertained that the hotel began as an inn for sick people who went to Nova Friburgo in search of a mild climate and a possible cure.

We assume that the family version tries to hide the not so glamourous beginnings of the Hotel Salusse, as an inn for tubercolosis patients, which by the second half of the XIX century was already frequented by the local elite, where great balls were held during the hot months of the year.

During the 1830s Marianne and Guillaume had six more children. As their offspring grew and business evolved, Marianne began worrying about her children’s marriages. According to her descendant, Sergio Bittencourt-Sampaio: “She considered very carefully whom her children should marry. She married them to families of landowners, except for one who was married in Europe.” The social alliances celebrated by her childrens’ marriages brought about further social ascent to the family, whose members were to occupy, in the beginning of the century, important public positions in the town. Perhaps the most significant example would be the marriage of her first daughter, Josephina, to José Marques Braga, a rich young man educated in England. According to a
local newspaper, with this marriage “the first daughter of a couple of young and poor settlers [became] (...) a lady surrounded by the comfort and well being that her husband’s fortune was to bestow on her” (newspaper “A Sentinela,” June 4th, 1899, Nova Friburgo).

2. Marianne Joset and the Town’s Memory

Family accounts enhance the great industriousness of Marianne’s figure, her practical and relentless nature, amidst other virtues traditionally associated to the swiss cultural heritage. This explains why Marianne should become an icon of that heritage in the town’s memory.

But we also perceive that this heritage has not always had the same value. If the swiss immigrants did not commit themselves, at first, to the preservation of the culture and traditions of their home country -- and the actual history of Marianne’s local alliances demonstrates that --, in the last decades of the century one can already identify sparse elements of valuation of their european past, as examplified by the simple mention of Josephina’s origin in the newspaper. At the same time, one observes the building up of an image of Nova Friburgo as a favourable place to recover one’s health -- due to its excellent climate -- as well as a center for education and leisure. These qualities were traditionally associated with Switzerland in the imaginary of the Brazilian elites. As a consequence, the juxtaposition of the images of Switzerland and Nova Friburgo occurred. Not only the ethnic group of its founders, but also the climate, allowed for a dissemination of the town’s image as the Brazilian Switzerland. The building up of this identity was not the result of a deliberately planned move by certain sectors of society, as defended by some contemporary authors, but rather a conjunction of scattered elements articulated over time.
It was in this context that Marianne’s figure became well known in Nova Friburgo. At the end of the century the press had already highlighted her character. After that, memorialists began to spread Marianne’s image as that of an authentic swiss, which resulted, for instance, in the exposure of a private family photo in a public exhibition. At present, a photo of Marianne published in a book of memoirs by a local author, in 1917 (Valle, 1917), is part of an exposition at the Immigrant Museum of Nova Friburgo, demonstrating how her figure became a part of the collective memory.

At this point it’s interesting to observe how Marianne’s figure represents some features of an ethnic identity that does not exist in essence, but rather as something constructed within the dynamics of contact between different cultures (Oliveira, 1976). In the same way as their memory, the identity of the immigrants is an open field to conflict and negotiation, in which some features are outlined, whilst others come to be forgotten -- or become slowly subterranean, in the words of Pollack (1989;1992) --, but without disappearing. In this respect, it’s impossible to state, as some recent studies do (Araújo, 1997; Costa, 1999), that the swiss immigration to Nova Friburgo did not, owing to specific conditions, leave its mark on present day society, and that the town’s memory as a “Brazilian Switzerland” was a distorted and illegitimate construction. Marianne’s trajectory demonstrates that there were connections in the family circle, as well as in the public sphere, which favoured the construction of a memory that, whilst silencing about certains aspects of her life, tried, on the other hand, to make this woman into a symbol of the identity values of a community in constant contact, and, therefore, under the intense dynamics of adaptation and self-preservation.
Bibliographic References


