

EDITOR'S NOTE

Dear readers,

We would like to dedicate this issue of *História, Ciências, Saúde – Manguinhos* to an extraordinary man who recently passed away: José Ephim Mindlin, son of Russian Jewish immigrants, one-time journalist and attorney, entrepreneur, and a faithful lover of culture and books. We have an 'institutional' reason for paying this tribute. As a member of the board of the Vitae Foundation, Mindlin played an important role in the approval of projects like the Oswaldo Cruz Foundation's Museum of Life and other cultural centers in the fields of science and technology. Mindlin was a rare example of a Brazilian businessman who invested in education and culture, like the great Anglo-Saxon magnates whose names and fortunes are associated with universities, museums, and other major institutions of renown. In Brazil's agrarian capitalist society, this has never been a common habit – read Giselle Sanglard's excellent study *Entre os salões e o laboratório: Guilherme Guinle, a saúde e a ciência no Rio de Janeiro, 1920-1940* (Between salons and the laboratory: Guilherme Guinle, health, and science in Rio de Janeiro, 1920-1940, Rio de Janeiro, Editora Fiocruz, 2008). In Brazil, this custom began enjoying financial incentives only a decade and a half ago under legislation that makes cultural investments tax deductible – although unfortunately these investments are all too often inspired by opportunistic product-placement criteria.

I also have personal reasons for honoring José Mindlin, which can be summed up in one sentence: "I wouldn't want to live in a world where there were no longer any books."

In a brilliant column entitled "L.I.V.R.O." (B.O.O.K.),¹ humorist Millôr Fernandes highlights the 'technological' reasons for defending this revolutionary invention, which does not depend on "wires, electrical circuits, or batteries. It doesn't have to be hooked up to anything or turned on. It's so easy to use that even a child can operate it. All you have to do is open it up!" Indeed, our love for this object which shapes our imagination and our intelligence is born in a child's relationship with books, and you, dear reader, know as well as I that the powerful, long-lasting mental images we take away from our first reading experiences will be of value to us throughout our lives. If you are a parent like I am, wanting to instill this love for books in your children even though you are swimming against a strong tide, you no doubt would have felt the same chill go down your spine if you had witnessed the scene I did: in the midst of a small crowd of bored people waiting for yet another delayed flight, a mother entertained her children. The older one, a pre-teen, was hyperactively pushing the buttons of a video game; the younger one – just two

¹ Available at Amigos do Livro: o portal do livro no Brasil (http://www.amigosdolivro.com.br/lermais_materias.php?cd_materias=3689; accessed March 5, 2010).

– was doing the same thing! For me, the incompetence of airline companies and this scene are both emblematic of our supposedly modern consumer society, which devours things without any critical thought. In a society lacking a longstanding cultural tradition, which only one short century ago abolished slavery without wholly freeing itself from a slave-culture mentality, where populist politicians on the left and right (whichever, it's all the same) inaugurate everything but libraries, we can already catch sight of a tidal wave of e-books, here in the midst of this Rio de Janeiro summer's overwhelming tidal wave of brown-outs.

Mindlin has carried me off to an airport, and so I ask your permission to embark on a journey that will give you a glimpse of the man to whom we pay tribute. What follows is a previously unpublished narrative by Miriam Junghans, who now works as a skilled researcher of the history of the sciences and is also an excellent German translator. Quoting:

For some years of my life, I was a flight attendant for Varig Brazilian airlines, of fond memory. I used to sneak peeks over passengers' shoulders to see what they were reading. I could make lists of the top ten in-flight books every month, in Brazil and abroad.

We were returning from Buenos Aires at the end of one calm afternoon, and a sweet old man was deep into Bóris Fausto's *Negócios e ócios*, just out that week. When I brought him his food tray, I suggested he pause in nourishing his spirit for a few minutes to nourish his body. He agreed in delight, and later called me over to chat.

The two of us were soon engaged in a lively exchange of ideas about books and reading. So what did I know about Bóris Fausto? Well, I studied history between one flight and another. My new friend enjoyed history a lot, as he did stories, and soon we discovered other felicitous affinities. For example, we both belonged to the club of those who don't leave home without a book, even if we're just going down to the corner. We quickly agreed that every book is a journey, and most of the times we only travel so we can later talk about what happened to us – so that we can share, like we do after reading a good book.

And suspended so many miles up in the air, we set about imagining what would happen if we suddenly found ourselves on a desert island. A suitcase is like a desert island after all. You have to decide what to take with you forever. He didn't hesitate even a split second: he would take Proust and, with all the time in the world, he would be able to revisit all lost times. Nor did I hesitate: I would take Italo Calvino's *Invisible cities*, the consummate metaphor of the pretentiousness of human dreams, juxtaposed with the fragility of what we actually manage to achieve.

Our plane was soon starting its descent and we reluctantly went back to the roles we played in that theater: bibliophile and flight attendant.

A while later, I received some very kind letters from my new friend, as well as some books and articles. I am sad to say that it was I who interrupted this priceless exchange. The cities we imagine in our dreams are built on delicate foundations, and lost time only comes back at moments like this, when I remember the magic moments I shared with José Mindlin.

I am still moved by the incredible generosity I perceived in him, a generosity manifested in his love for books and for the people who write and read them. An insatiable curiosity about true life, beyond pages and parts.

Jaime L. Benchimol
Editor