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Present in absentia: Immigrant letters and requests for family reunification

Presença na ausência: cartas na imigração e cartas de chamada

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Abstract: Immigrant letters are a major source to learn not only about the circumstances and challenges involved in the migratory experience, but especially the mentality of historical actors involved in it. This article seeks first to emphasize the importance of the topic; it then discusses the expansion of studies on the migrants' letters, to finish by illustrating the aspirations and hesitations involving family reunification, as well as the control and authority exerted at a distance through a particular type of letters – the so-called requests for family reunification – written by Portuguese immigrants in São Paulo in the early 20th century.

Keywords: immigrants' letters, Portuguese immigration, gender and family relations.

Resumo: Cartas de imigrantes constituem uma fonte privilegiada para se apreender não apenas as circunstâncias e desafios envolvendo a experiência migratória, mas, sobretudo, a mentalidade dos agentes históricos nela envolvidos. O presente artigo procura em primeiro lugar ressaltar a relevância do tema; em seguida, discorre sobre a expansão dos estudos sobre os escritos dos e/ou imigrantes, para concluir ilustrando os anseios e hesitações envolvendo a reunificação familiar, bem como o controle e a autoridade exercidos a distância por meio de um tipo particular de correspondência – as cartas de chamada – escrita por imigrantes portugueses em São Paulo no início do século XX.

Palavras-chave: cartas de chamada, imigração portuguesa, cultura escrita popular, relações de gênero, relações familiares.

Introduction

Letters not only show processes of displacement and separation, they are also the product of both. These letters often became documents used in the immigration process to prove ties and make it possible to leave and/or to enter the countries of origin and of destination. In our case we worked with a corpus of unpublished documents, constituted by the so-called letters of reunification between Portuguese migrants and their families, found in district archives of the

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cities of Porto and Braga, in Portugal, and in the São Paulo Immigrant Museum (deposited in the Public Archive of the state of São Paulo).

In the case of the district archives, the letters are in the files of proceedings to obtain passports, since it was mandatory to present them for this purpose, because, according to Portuguese law, married women and underage children could not emigrate without the permission of their husbands and fathers. Travel abroad was restricted, because the permanence of conjugal ties and keeping the family in Portugal acted as a support, increasing the possibility that the person would return and making it easier to continue sending money, which became essential to the family and to the country's economy. On the basis of decree no. 7427 of April 30, 1921, the Portuguese government induced a change in the usual practice of writing family letters with new formalities. The letters were replaced by a standard and objective type of consular printed form, and no longer provided the previous references and information that are such a delightful historical source.

On the other hand, in the case of the small number of letters of reunification found in the files of the Immigrants' Hostel ("Hospedaria dos Imigrantes"), these were the documental evidence that the immigrant had to present in the port of Santos to the Immigration Inspector, and they were attached to the landing lists filed at the Hostel. From 1911 onwards, this document became mandatory for people over the age of 60 and who were not able to work, in an attempt by the Brazilian government to ensure family support for this more vulnerable group.

In the first case, these letters were generally addressed by the husband (who had left before) to his wife or some other family member.³ Although access to the correspondence is only partial, since it covers only one direction (from the husband to the wife, and not vice-versa), even unilaterally it is often possible to infer the nature of the dialogue between them.

The letters not only documented the worlds of origin and of destination; they were also an attempt to question silences, overcome distances, perpetuate affections, reinforce ties and combat the feeling of homesickness and missing dear ones, reconfiguring relationships that had become vulnerable through the long distance and time of separation.

The present article first discusses the relevance of the topic, then the expansion of studies on the writings of the emigrants/immigrants, and finally illustrates the aspirations and hesitations involved in family reunification, as well as the control and authority exerted at a distance by some letters of reunification analyzed here.

Letters and migrations: a universe to be explored

The private writings that comprehend the so-called "ordinary writings" cover a variety of texts, including the writing of the popular classes (Chartier, 1991). Little attention has been given to them by historiography, probably due to preconceived views that the popular classes (due to their low level of literacy) were not able to produce significant records (Molinari, 1999). Initially these sources appeared in scientific investigations as alternative and/or complementary sources (Castillo Gómez, 2001); however, their use became disseminated when an opening was enabled by the emergence of the "other histories" (Matos, 2002), which expanded interest regarding the varied experiences of the past. These recent perspectives generated the need for new corpuses of documents and gave value to the "ordinary writings" that enabled fruitful discoveries regarding the histories of the popular classes, including their written culture.

The popular classes produced their own records, but often they have not been preserved in public archives, rather they were conserved over the times and kept secretly in attics and trunks, in a more affective sense, and aiming to preserve the family or group memory. These sources spell out multiple, exceptional experiences, personal adventures, references to daily private life, and subjective issues and sensitivities.

Since the middle of the Modern Era, in some countries in Europe, the popular classes exercised the ability to write because they had to deal with the bureaucratic demands of the modern state, which coincided with a certain dissemination of the literacy and schooling processes. Although the relation between the faster literacy/schooling processes and the increase of the number of popular texts is recognized, certainly the major factor for this expansion was the need for communication generated by wars (especially from World War I onwards) and displacements (Blass, 2004).

The mobility required from the emigrants/immigrants the exercise of reading/writing, and a broad textual spectrum became part of this universe. A set of handbooks and guidebooks, booklets, leaflets, periodicals, magazines, information regarding travel and the conditions in the countries to which they were going, directions about the bureaucratic procedures (passport and authorizations), and several other writings were circulated.

Likewise, an outstanding role is assigned to the displacements as elements stimulating the dissemination

³ The same was observed by Seyferth (2005, p. 23) regarding letters from the Polish.

and consolidation of reading/writing among the masses of emigrants/immigrants with a low level of literacy, who were challenged to produce documents invoking this process. The distance among family members was the main reason that led the popular classes to deal with the pen, moved by the desire to preserve domestic and family connections, with a need to maintain and/or construct chains of ink and links of paper, which became a practice, need, and moral obligation.

While at the beginning of the 1800s letters between Portugal and Brazil took approximately 60 days, this time was markedly reduced by the expansion of railways, steamships and mailbags. In the second half of the 19th century missives could arrive at their destination in up to 20 days (Rodrigues, 2013, p. 83). Through these missives, people tried to overcome the separation, control things at a distance, combat silences, perpetuate affections, reinforce family, kinship and friendship ties, be present in absentia, take up responsibilities and get around the feeling of homesickness and missing dear ones.

The letters not only portrayed the process of emigration/immigration and separation, they were also their product. The act of writing letters was considered privileged, free, secret, intimate, a true telling of individual experiences. However, when written at request, the letters were often read and reread in public, and also became collective experiences in the form of texts that were initially private and domestic and ended up being shared. “Although they were private and intimate, the letters took on public importance as a way of conveying messages, which reinforced the connection with the community of origin, thus enabling the transfer of other groups of immigrants” (Vendrame, 2010, p. 70). The letters were the means by which one could question silences, overcome distances, perpetuate affections and reinforce family, kinship and friendship ties.

Thanks to the circulation of the missives it is possible to observe the displacement from the kaleidoscopic viewpoint of its protagonists, enabling an understanding of the social, cultural and identity changes. Besides the ties and the sociability that were created in the process (Chartier, 1991), the practices of writing, even derived from a popular and sometimes marginal culture, gained expression in their own literary form – epistolary literature, with specific styles, rhetoric and conventions.

As a real “documentary treasure” of popular writing and memory (because of their volume and frequency), the letters of the emigrants/immigrants became of interest to scholars, enabling researchers to penetrate an invisible area that allows observing new projects, successes, financial

problems, survival tactics, social ascension, difficulties in everyday life in the countryside and in the city, affective relations, subjectivities and sensitivities (suffering and anxieties, joys and frustrations). All these essential pieces of individual experiences shed light on the histories of emigration/immigration by explaining aspects that are difficult or almost impossible to perceive in other documental corpuses (Caffarena, 2012, p. 19).

The study of migrant writings enables us to understand the variety of uses and functions of what was written at this historical period, depending on the places where it was written and the reasons why, and, because of all this, on the material differences presented by the different documents. Looking at the protagonists of this phenomenon and using the sources that they themselves produced leads the historian to see emigration from a new, fundamental viewpoint. In brief, to understand that these documents not only tell us about the experience of common men and women, but are also its product and direct consequence (Blass, 2004, p. 97).

Expansion and studies on the emigrants/immigrants' writings

From the end of the 19th century onwards, it is possible to trace studies that focused on the emigrants/immigrants' letters: in 1892, for instance, the Italian Commissioner for Emigration, Luigi Bodio, used missives (700 letters) from Brazil to evaluate the conditions of the Italians who were coming to this country (Bodio, 1894).⁴ Likewise, in 1913 the physician and writer Filippo Lussana highlighted aspects of the epistolography of emigration/immigration by analyzing this material (Lussana, 1913).

Considered a classic of the correspondence from emigrants and immigrants, William Isaac Thomas and Florian Znaniecki (1918-20) recompiled five volumes of letters in a work that, in its introduction, discusses a methodological approach to the use of such sources that is still constantly referenced today (Thomas and Znaniecki, 1958).

In parallel with that, although with different concerns, a generation of North American historians trained in the 1920s and 1930s, all of them the children of immigrants, began to challenge the kind of narrative prevailing in North American history, intending to incorporate the stories of common people and ordinary

⁴ Newspapers of the time published letters as advertisement for emigration or to denounce the conditions of the emigrants in the country.

families from whom they themselves descended. These authors discovered in the letters exchanged a possibility of capturing the experience of immigration through the very words of the people involved, which gave a special color to the work usually developed on the basis of other sources. In this way, collections of letters by immigrants were published by historians in the United States⁵, Europe, Canada and Australia throughout the 20th century due to their interest in studying social and political integration processes, changes in the family structure, involvements in revolutions and wars, and, in general, changes in the popular culture (Elliott *et al.*, 2006).

Contemporaneously, there are outstanding studies developed at the University of Alcalá (Spain), at SIECE (Interdisciplinary Seminar on Studies of Written Culture), and it is worth mentioning the works by Veronica Blass and Laura Martínez Martín, who prioritize the letters of Spanish emigrants/immigrants to Latin America. The Center for Studies of the Galego Immigration at the University of Santiago de Compostela is also worth mentioning. There the research by Xosé M. Nuñez Seixas and Raúl Soutelo Vázquez (Nuñez Seixas and Soutelo Vázquez, 2005; Soutelo Vázquez, 2001, 2003) was developed.

In Italy, in the Archivio Ligure della Scrittura Popolare, at the University of Genoa, there are outstanding studies led by Antonio Gibelli and Fabio Caffarena and, for the Italian emigrants to Brazil, studies by Federico Croci (Gibelli, 1989, 2002; Gibelli and Caffarena, 2001; Croci, 2008). Focusing on immigration to the south of the country, Vendrame (2010) analyzed a few letters sent by Italian immigrants who settled in the colonial regions of Caxias do Sul and Santa Maria to their relatives in Italy, while Seyferth (2005) commented on the letters from the Polish compiled by Kula (1977) and Wachowicz (1981), as well as the letters from Germans compiled by Vendrame (2010). Vendrame (2010, p. 70) stresses the importance of the letters in attracting new immigrants, relatives to them or not, since these were the means par excellence of “relationship between those who stayed and those who left, [enabling] the understanding of choices, habits, beliefs and kinship ties of the families of the immigrants who established themselves in colonial settlements”. The same point is emphasized by Seyferth (2005, p. 47), who mentions that the letters and narratives “call attention to the maintenance of family ties with those who remained in the society of origin and the effort to bring the closest relatives to Brazil”.

In 1979 Emilio Franzina had already published a collection of letters written by peasants from Veneto who

emigrated to Latin America, while Franco Ramella and Samuel Baily analyzed the correspondence exchanged between the members of the Sola family between Piedmonte and Buenos Aires (Franzina, 1979; Baily and Ramella, 1988).

On the other hand, in Portugal the investigations by Henrique Rodrigues deserve to be mentioned. They concentrated on the letters of people who emigrated from Viana do Castelo (Rodrigues, 2013). The attempt to illustrate the life of emigrants and immigrants of French-language origin gave rise to the organization of the collection *Envoyer et recevoir. Lettres et correspondances dans les diasporas francophones*, published in 2006 (Frenette *et al.*, 2006).

In comparison to such diversity, and despite their potential, the historiographic recognition of migrants' letters in Brazil is still limited, especially compared to the research done in Italy, Great Britain, France, Spain and in receiving countries such as the USA and Argentina.

Meanings of the dialogues: family reunification, authority and control, said and not said

Although epistolary writing is old, it expanded with the increase in communications and the intensification of mobility, as already mentioned. Displacements, made easier by the development of transportation by trains and ships, became mass “phenomena”, and this historical migratory experience increased the distances between people, creating a need to communicate and efforts to approach. Letter-writing was disseminated, as already mentioned, including the popular classes, in a challenge to a less literate mass that, with great effort, tried to maintain ties. Thus new experiences of epistolary practice were disseminated and writing was “democratized”.

Departures increased the feeling of separation, and even before the sight of the port of departure dissipated on the horizon, writing began in an effort to maintain ties; those who remained behind waited anxiously for the letters and complained of the lack of answers, showing the wish for dialogue.

The moment of separation, the physical distance from home, the feeling of being far away when one has already arrived in the country of destination, trigger the decisive impulse to take up pen and paper and face the act of writing. Often the exchanges of letters with the relatives already begin on board the ships travel-

⁵ In the United States a very significant tradition was established regarding studies that try to focus on the experience of migration through personal letters. The Immigration History Research Center itself, located in Minnesota, has a great number of letter collections that have been used as an empirical base to develop the topic.

ling to the New World, or at the time of physical and mental departure of those who leave the family and social context (Caffarena, 2012, p. 21).

As an ensemble, the missives record different experiences, revealing personal and family relations (disaggregation, separation and family reunion), involving solidarity in difficulties, support (rivalries, affections and friendships), showing interests, perspectives and possibilities, but their main theme is the effort to bring the family together again.

In the first months, people were quick to answer, long texts were written, with plenty of details and explanations, narrating the first impressions; the topics were departure, the description of the voyage, arrival and first impressions, besides work, business and new relationships, and also requests for news of events in the family and in the village. In time, the regularity and length diminished as more routine prevailed in everyday life, but the letters were normally present on celebratory occasions or when major changes occurred. Even so, writing became more occasional, with a shorter text and less information.

Although usually only one copy of each letter is available, one can observe that the rate of mailing was very variable. On the basis of the texts, in some cases one can see a regular, constant exchange, also delays in answering, complaints about the lack of news, months-long silences, or even an entire year, and requests to write more often. Systematizing the dates, one can observe that the months with the highest incidence were April, December and October, the two first because of Easter and Christmas celebrations. The more intense exchange in October was due to the agricultural production cycle in Europe and denotes an interest in keeping up with agricultural work and, above all, the results of harvests in general and the vintage in particular (Rodrigues, 2013, p. 79).

Time sometimes even caused estrangement and surprises of a physical nature, as in the correspondence of July 1914 from Antonio Teixeira Cardozo to Maria José, 47 years old, born in Porto: "The portraits you sent me I found them very good, and I see that the little girls are plump and grown, they hardly look the same" (Arquivo Distrital do Porto, Requisição de Passaportes [ADP-RP], process no. 1138).

Despite all efforts to remain close, gradually cultural differences appeared, due to the life-changing experiences such as crossing the ocean, the arrival in an unknown territory, facing challenges and deprivations.

The process of receiving the letters together with the tensions it involved should be underscored, ranging from doubts about the letters sent and not received to the topic of the different meanings grasped by the reader,

permeated by power relations between the author and the addressee. It is possible to observe how gender relations were formed, reaffirmed or subverted by means of the process of writing and reading the letters.

Letters exchanged between migrants and their families expressed different views about the household and everyday practices, processes of change, negotiation of identities, adaptation to the societies to which they came (there are letters announcing the intention of getting married or becoming a citizen), or the immigrants' difficulties to integrate, how the "others" were constituted and what their attitude was towards them (Elliott *et al.*, 2006, p. 9).

It was relatively usual for the men to emigrate first, thus attenuating the impacts of change, and, in a preventive action against possible misfortunes, leave calling the remainder of the family to a more favorable time, when they were already settled and were in a better financial situation. Although most of the letters were written by men, there are constant mentions of the women, above all as addressees, in them. While the letters can indeed serve as a guide to recover the presence of women in the emigration/immigration process, on the other hand, between the lines, one can observe echoes of the silenced female voices, the resistance to departures, the demand for news or remittances.

Men, through the missives, tried to make themselves present in absentia, maintain control at a distance, request news, advice and guidance from family members, particularly from their wives (whether they should or not move to the city, change jobs, enlarge the business, etc.). Likewise it was common for letters to be sent for the purpose of obtaining a wife, since for several reasons gender imbalances or even ethnic and racial animosities at the place of arrival could lead men who had already emigrated to seek future wives in their home countries, often expressing the desire to preserve the original culture or honoring prior commitments. Phenomena such as weddings on the wharf, immediately after landing from the ship, were only possible by making prior arrangements through letters (Sinke, 2006).

Letters become a representation of the absent authority that, despite the distance, reproduces family relations and hierarchies, interfering directly or indirectly in everyday life, in business, in problems with land and livestock, with a discourse on how to treat, what, for whom when and for how much to sell, and above all, since they were letters of reunification, how, when and why to come.

Sometimes the writing sounds like an order given by someone who only informs and decides, without accepting any challenges: "Joana, **I inform you** that I have written to your brother-in-law Silvestre **to give him an order** that when he returns to this country with the family he should

bring you and our children with him” [Manuel dos Santos to Joana Rosa, 24 years old, Born in Guimarães, and three daughters, on June 20, 1914, (ADP-RP, proc. no. 1110)]. This applies both to crucial matters, such as the date of travel – “as soon as you receive this letter prepare yourself, because I want to see whether you will come to eat ‘rabanas’ [a typical sweet] with me” [Antonio Ribeiro to Joaquina Maria da Conceição, on February 20, 1914 (ADP-RP, proc. no. 651)] – and for more run-of-mill topics: “Do not bring pots and pans or anything else, only bring what I told you to bring, nothing more” [Joaquim Teixeira to Rosa Moreira, on October 28, 1913 (ADP-RP, proc. no. 211)].

At the same time, anxious and maybe even insecure due to the time of absence and to the distance, it is relatively common for men to sign off seeking to reaffirm their male role in the couple’s gender relations: – “I’m your man”, wrote Manoel Gomes Pereira to Carolina, on November 14, 1913, or “from this man of yours who soon wants to have you” ended the letter received by Matilde de Jesus, 55 years old, born in Lamego (ADP-RP, procs. no. 245 and 346).

Or also, in an admonishing tone: “You know perfectly well that a woman’s place is with her husband”, wrote Alfredo Ferreira to Laura da Soledade, 27 years, born in Conselho de Arouca, on October 27, 1913 (ADP-RP, proc. no. 320).

In the missives, some husbands wrote tenderly, showing love and affection, as Antonio de Almeida wrote his wife Teresa da Costa de Oliveira, in 1910:

[...] I personally have faith in God that soon we will be in each other’s arms, and that only thus will my spirit be quietened, as soon as I have my love by my side, I have had so few joys in being far from the person I most esteem in this life, that I have been in a purgatory in this world because of your absence. You can’t imagine how my eyes are always full of tears because of my love from my heart ... receive a thousand hugs and a thousand kisses from this your very humble husband, until God lets us embrace (in Sarmento, 1999, p. 291).

Or else:

[...] write me by return of mail and receive an embrace from this husband and friend, I miss you and am dying for you to come [Antonio Ribeiro to Joaquina Maria da Conceição, in 1913, and children aged 4 and 1 year, living in Porto (ADP-RP, proc. no. 651)].

Others, less loving and more pragmatic, declared that they missed the women in everyday life, had many expenses with food and laundry, and really, really needed them to get on with life.

I cannot stand how much I miss the children, and I have missed you too, since I had a cold that wouldn’t go away, but if you had been here, this would not happen to me [Antonio Teixeira Cardozo to Maria José, 47 years, born in Porto, on July 13, 1914 (ADP-RP, proc. no. 1138)].

Anna, I need you to come and be with me, because I can’t be without you, in my life I need a woman, therefore come and join me and I’ll make a lot of money [Pinto Cardozo de Souza to his wife Anna da Silva, 29 years, born in Gaia, and daughter, in March 1914 (ADP-RP, proc. no. 167)].

Certain husbands waited patiently, others presented ultimatums. They said that they would no longer write, that that would be the last attempt and intimidated their wives by threatening to abandon them if they did not come, as in the letter written by José Fernandes da Silva to his wife in 1918:

[...] you know very well that I have never liked to be gainsaid, and after I told you that you should not gainsay me, you pretended that I was not your man, well you had better know me, I told you to come, and your obligation was to come (ADP-RP, proc. no. 482).

There are many other examples:

Albina, I’m very surprised that you are taking so long, after I told you to come so many times and sent money for travels and for expenses, I don’t know what you lack now. It is probably the will, but I won’t wait forever, so get a move on as soon as you get this [Albino Ribeiro to Albina de Jesus, 38 years, born in Figueira Verde, and six children, on January 4, 1914 (ADP-RP, proc. no. 852)].

Or else from a father to his son, who apparently was very hesitant about crossing the Atlantic:

Now after you let me know that you had been set free at the inspection, I have written three letters to you telling you to come to me, and for this I have also already sent you money.

Now once again I am writing you to come without wasting any time, I don’t know why you resist joining us and coming to lands of plenty, but if you do not come, it will be because you want nothing to do with your father, therefore very sorrowfully I tell you that I no longer want to have anything to do with you [Antonio de Freitas to his son Manoel de Freitas, 20

years old, resident in Vila do Conde, on December 10, 1913 (ADP-RP, proc. no. 50)].

Manuel de Sousa Monteiro, on the other hand, in his letter in 1913, responding to the insistence of his wife, wrote that he would not call her "... because I have a very pretty mulatto girl with me, even you would be charmed if you saw her..." (Letter no. 181, of November 14, 1921. Fundo Hospedaria dos Imigrantes de São Paulo, APESP).

The husbands' departure affected women's everyday life, increasing their work and responsibility, because, besides household activities and taking care of the children, they took over the maintenance of the properties, the farming work, the trade and family businesses. Hence, in addition to their traditional roles they took over the family business, managed the couple's assets and administered the use of the remittances, and also worked in the shops and in the field (they plowed, dug, harvested, prepared the products and took care of the livestock and their byproducts), besides other activities essential for survival, such as collecting wood for themselves and to sell (bakeries and potteries), and spinning and weaving (linen and wool), among other activities.

In the letters it can be noticed that they accused the husbands of remaining indifferent to problems and expressed jealousy because of gossip and slander. The family conflicts grew with distance and can be perceived via the complaints of wives who felt neglected, left helpless, alone with the children, often even going hungry. Sometimes a serious misfortune provided an argument for family reunification, as can be seen in a letter sent by José Gomes da Silva to his wife Maria da Conceição, trying to convince her to travel:

What made me feel the worst was the death of my daughter without even seeing her, it is my greatest sorrow, the same could happen to you or to me, therefore come to be with me, because we will always be happier living together than being separated, without knowing when I'll be able to rejoin you (ADP-RP, proc. no. 364).

Other wives, however, did not want to join their husbands – the husbands' departure, despite the many things that the wives had to do, was a certain relief, because they felt more in charge of their own lives, they became used to dealing with money and with business, took on the role of manager of family affairs and were free from undesired pregnancies.

There were women who expressed fear of the trip, of returning to domestic subservience and of the multiple uncertainties of an unknown country. These doubts were often fed, deliberately or not, by the letters they received from their husbands:

[...] here things are not good, but one will always find something to eat [José Gomes da Silva to his wife Maria da Conceição, 25 years old, married, born in Castelo de Paiva, and daughter (ADP-RP, proc. no. 364)].

Or:

[...] you'll have to accept the consequences to which I subject myself here, sometimes it is good, at others bad [Eduardo da Silva Pinto to his wife Angelina Rosa, seamstress, 29 years old, born in Concelho de Mesão Frio, and 9-year old son, on April 12, 1914 (ADP-RP, proc. no. 527)].

The husbands themselves, although generally desirous of seeing their families again, also feared for the trip of their wife and children without the company of someone trustworthy to protect them.

Take great care with the little girls, especially in Leixões and during the trip, so that nothing goes wrong 6 or 15 days before boarding ship [Antonio Teixeira Cardozo to Maria José, 47 years old, born in Porto, on July 13, 1914 (ADP-RP, proc. no. 1138)].

[...] you forget having no fear of coming, you come and also Preciosa, you listen to what she says, but the two of you have to come, so that when one of you goes out, the other stays with the children [Antonio Ribeiro to Joaquina Maria de Conceição, in 1913, and children aged 4 and 1 year (ADP-RP, proc. no. 651)].

If perchance some family comes from there, you write to come with them, I think that your brother-in-law also wants to come to Brazil, if he comes, you come with him, if nobody is coming, I'll go and fetch you [received by Maria Valmira Rodrigues Barbosa, 24 years, born in Viseca, and 1-year old son, on February 25, 1913 (ADP-RP, proc. no. 144)].

[...] always stay near the respectable women, both by day and by night, try to have a bed always near respectable women, because a woman ... must be respectable everywhere. Do not be afraid of boarding, that is child's play, your Joaquim Teixeira (ADP-RP, proc. no. 211).

Sometimes the wives made up excuses not to come (she was ill, a child was ill, her parents were ill), seeking for ways to put off the trip. Some spent the money that had been sent and did not leave; others, after many threats and complaints from their husbands, travelled out of fear that they would be abandoned.

I know well that you find it difficult to leave your family, but remember that you are coming to your husband... Thus, I won't bother you anymore... I hope that you will come soon, that it will not be necessary for me to write another letter. N.B.: If you do not come, this is the last letter that I'm writing you, and I will no longer care about you [Antonio de Castro to Maria da Conceição Pinto da Silva, born in Gaia, on December 23, 1913 (ADP-RP, proc. no. 157)].

Or:

Hear well what I say. You will have people there who tell you not to come, but you only have to listen to what I say, I cannot go there because right now I don't have money to go and fetch you [Antonio Ribeiro to Joaquina Maria de Conceição, in 1913, and children aged 4 and 1 year (ADP-RP, proc. no. 651)].

Or else:

Since 15 months ago I told you to come and until now I have been [...] this is the last letter I wrote to you for this purpose, I also want you in my company and that you bring with you the three children, Adelaide, Lourianna and Frectoso, I even mentioned this [received by Matilde de Jesus, 55 years, born in Lamego (ADP-RP, proc. no. 346)].

Others did not go as far as making threats, but complained:

I am writing hoping that you will come, it is high time [Joaquim Rodrigues in a letter written from Monte Azul (SP) to his wife Rosa Tavares da Silva, 35 years old, born in Gaia, on April 22, 1914 (ADP-RP, proc. 511)].

Some wives, in turn, were anxious for the reunion, they insisted, pressured for the letter of reunification, threatened to leave for Brazil, and even without authorization they sought loopholes and alternatives. Some husbands responded with pacifying messages, others imposed conditions (not to bring her mother, not coming with her siblings, control her temper) and several ultimately gave in to the requests and told them to come.

[...] here I received your letter and there I saw how clearly you let me know, since you are so anxious to join me, I have decided to do what you want [Antonio de Castro to his wife Maria da Conceição Pinto da Silva, 28 years old, born in Gaia, on December 23, 1913 (ADP-RP, proc. no. 157)].

On this day I write [...] and our dear children through my mother you must be surprised at my silence now I have to tell you that José Fernandes holds a promissory note with the amount needed for you and the children to travel to this country, because you must know that to send money there the exchange is very high therefore as I say come and our children so that we put an end to all this [Alfredo Ferreira to Laura da Soledade, 27 years, born in Conselho de Arouca, and 3-year old daughter on October 27, 1913 (ADP-RP, proc. no. 320)].

Alone or with their children, they faced the travel across the Atlantic, with the prospect of an unknown country, in search of their dream to build up their family again.

I don't know whether you would be happy that I have you come? But be patient, because I want to be with you! I wrote that you should come, now let's see what you tell me! If you do not come, do not send clothes, because I do not accept them!... I won't even write anymore. I would not have you come if you never asked me. But now, whether you want it or not, you have a choice of two paths [Manoel Gomes Pereira to Carolina Augusta de Bastos, 19 years, born in Macieira de Coimbra, and son, 2 years old (ADP-RP, proc. no. 245)].

Once they have decided to come, it is very common for the husbands to advise their wives very precisely about what they should bring, as stipulated in the letters of October 28, 1913 and November 30, 1913 received by Rosa Maria and Maria Pinto, respectively:

Look, go and buy a box like that of Damião more or less ..., and then in it you put all your clothes and the bedclothes too, and afterwards only put in, for instance, forks and spoons, and 3 or 4 small plates, and [...] the small sewing kit, and all those little nonsenses that you want to bring, and hurry to have slippers made, and buy some stockings and put ... delicate clothes in a bag to bring it in the steamer because they are very necessary (ADP-RP, proc. no. 211).

I received your letters to which I am answering, one of November 8 in which you say that you killed the sow, you did well, send me the loins, you ask whether you should bring it, there is a lot of meat here, and to bring it the customs taxes are very expensive and there are many eaters, bring a few apples and walnuts (ADP-RP, proc. no. 657).

Obviously in the missives there are also cases of husbands who did not express any wish for a reunion or referred in a vague manner to family reunification. They had come alone or with friends, enjoyed freedom (which was impossible in the society they came from) and no longer wished to return to the previous situation. Some men no longer sent news, never returned and founded new families in Brazil. The women waited endlessly and became “widows with living husbands”, with feelings of missing them.

Finally, even acknowledging that these letters of reunification attempted to fulfill the requirements of government laws, they must also be seen in the context of aspirations of the parties involved, and they give us a possibility of observing the problem of silences, omissions, understatements and untruths, of leaving out the painful aspects, inconveniences, embarrassments. It is then clear that not everything that appears in the letters can be considered “the expression of the truth”, and also that not everything that might have been said appears in them. In this way they comprise a documentation that is strategic to analyze also what was not said and what was said between the lines, as we attempted to do here by exploring the aspirations for family reunification, the gaps that distance and time of separation imposed on relationships, and also the fears involving the trip and life in a new country. In these cases in which “narrative truths” are superposed on “factual truths”, the effort and commitment to maintain contact and relationship stand out, often at the expense of clarity and faithful reporting of experiences that were made.

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