

Project notes Brazilians in Israel, oral history and virtual exhibitions

Abstract

The community of Brazilian immigrants in Israel is made up of around 17,000 people. The first of them began to immigrate in the 1950s, motivated by Zionism and willing to build the young State of Israel that was being formed at the time. Unlike other groups of immigrants, who have locus in places of memory such as ethnographic museums to represent their communities, Brazilians still do not have a place to narrate their trajectory and diversity. There are also few studies on this group. In view of this, in 2020 a group of Brazilian and Israeli researchers conceived the Brazilians in Israel project: memories and diversity. Among the objectives of this interinstitutional initiative, emphasis on the collection and preservation of the life stories of these Brazilians who immigrated to Israel at different times and motivated by numerous factors. The necessary dissemination of these oral histories imposed some challenges on the project. Among them, to reflect on strategies to guarantee, on the one hand, visibility to the Brazilian community in a contemporary language and, on the other hand, accessibility. For this, museological communication in the form of an exhibition in cyberspace was chosen. This brief report presents the aforementioned project, its paths and some aspects related to virtual exhibitions.

Keywords: virtual exhibition, oral history, Brazilian immigrants, Israel, museum of the person

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Introduction

Currently, approximately 17,000 Brazilians live in Israel.¹ There are more than 200 museums in Israel, 34 of which were considered ethnographic museums by Noam Perry and Ruth Kark² in their research on places of memory dedicated to the representation and memories of social groups in that country. The absence of institutions in Israel dedicated to the preservation and dissemination of the memories of Latin American and Brazilian immigrants, together with the scarcity of academic production on Brazilians in Israel³⁻⁵ led to the formation of a network of researchers on this topic. Thus, in 2020 a group of Brazilian and Israeli researchers conceived the Brazilians in Israel project: memories and diversity. Turned into an extension of the Museu da Pessoa – Núcleo Brasileiros em Israel – it comprises a digital collection of life stories of Brazilians who immigrated to Israel, which has been formed ever since. Held within the scope of an international cooperation between the Fluminense Federal University (UFF - Brazil) and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (HUJI - Israel), it also brings together other Israeli institutions such as the Ben-Gurion University of the Negev (BGU) and Brazilian institutions such as the Federal do Triângulo Mineiro (UFTM) and the Museum of the Person.

This project proposes to give visibility to this community of Brazilians and, since its inception, it has been collecting oral histories with these immigrants, forming, from there, a natural digital collection have among their aims to preserve this collection and spread what it means to be Brazilian in Israel, through different communication formats. With that, the need to publicize this collection, museological communication was chosen in the form of a virtual exhibition.

A preliminary study⁶ focused on narratives about Jews in Brazil, exhibited in person in Brazilian Jewish museums, and in virtual exhibitions, identified some limits for the collective elaboration of an exhibition in cyberspace. This presented another challenge to the project team, which needed to reflect on aspects of the collective conception and execution of an exhibition in cyberspace. Ethnographic

museums in Israel were formed in the context of the second decade of the 20th century from conceptual bases different from those of 19th century Europe. If, on the one hand, the colonial mark inherent to European ethnographic museums is not present in these institutions, on the other hand, they were conceived with a strong nationalist bias. Thus, in their early days these ethnographic museums narrated the history of the nation, almost “erasing” or “silence” the multiplicity of peoples/cultures that moved to participate in the formation of the State of Israel (Perry and Kark).

However, as Perry and Kark reveal, the formation and narratives of ethnographic museums in Israel have changed and today many focus on minority groups. As a result, we see a growth in the number of museums dedicated to such groups. On the other hand, not all small communities in Israel are represented in these spaces and, so far, none of them are dedicated to the memories of Brazilians as mentioned above. Starting from museological communication the exhibitions in its face to face and virtual aspects as a communicational possibility, we seek to articulate the preservation of the memories of the Brazilian immigrant community in Israel with the exhibition possibilities of cyberspace, presenting in this brief report the Brazilian Project in Israel and its conceptual references.

Conceptual references

The technological revolution based on information, especially the Internet, profoundly transformed humanity⁷⁻⁹ including the field of museums and exhibitions. The information society, driven by the advance of the internet, has affected all aspects of human life, including museums. Since the mid-1990s, the internet has been used as a new space for different purposes in museology.

As it reveals Oliveira,¹⁰ since 1994, with the Internet, museology has had a new space for exhibitions, research and dissemination that is cyberspace, as was the case of the Museum of the Person. If cyberspace, since then, has been a new “place” occupied by institutions of memory, face-to-face museums have taken on the

challenge of “occupying” this new place. Initially, they sought to digitize their collections and created websites to provide information and services. Since then, virtual exhibitions have been shown to be a communication alternative for museums in the 21st century.

Until the beginning of the 2000s, the internet was basically used as a communication vehicle for museums through websites. The internet environment was used for museum marketing, with general information and dissemination of activities. Few explored the potential of the internet environment for exchange actions, which would enable a more interactive relationship with the public, with other specialists and with other institutions.¹¹

Precisely for this reason, at that time, Pierre Levy questioned the way in which museums related to the internet, which was used to display the content of these institutions’ collections as “internet catalogues”. Levy brought up a still current issue that highlighted the very idea of the museum as “value”. It is enough to remember the concept of a museum in the 19th century, of a building with a collection. The advent of the virtual museum, as already revealed by the ecomuseums of the 1960s, also points to the idea that a building is not necessary to be a museum.

Another important change brought about by the internet was in the notions of time and space, since virtual museums and exhibitions never close, and can be visited from anywhere as long as you have a connection to the web. As Henriques¹¹ reveals, from the point of view of the exhibitions, the impacts are relevant because the internet made it possible to make the exhibition three-dimensional, creating new perspectives for presenting the collection.

However, it was at the turn of the 21st century, with the exponential growth of broadband internet and the development of more sophisticated technologies that virtual exhibitions really took off. Aspects of navigability, immersion and interactivity have become increasingly characteristic of this type of exhibition. With the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, there has been a significant increase in the number of virtual exhibitions. As we said, a not-so-recent phenomenon, virtual exhibitions offer different forms and levels of interactivity, occupying cyberspace and challenging museological institutions to reach new audiences. For the purposes of the *Brasileiros em Israel* project, we evoke the concept of the virtual museum, as described by Henriques, as a space of mediation and relationship between heritage and users. Following the lead of this author, there would be two configurations of virtual museums: the virtual museum based on a physical museum and the essentially virtual museum. In Henriques’ view, virtual museums or museum websites, which are just a version of what exists in person, reinforce the 19th century museum concept and show themselves as simulacra of museums.

We believe, like Henriques, that a central issue in this reflection lies in interactivity and the ability to use the internet as an “interaction space”. Thus, considering the collection of oral histories that *Núcleo Brasileiros em Israel* has formed, we asked about the possibilities of disseminating it through a virtual exhibition. Other questions we pose are: 1) how to create a space for interaction with potential audiences?; 2) how to communicate this digital heritage, in terms of Dodebei,¹² to different audiences? Far from answering them in this brief report, here we highlight some other aspects trying to associate life stories with the possibilities of virtual exhibitions and, for that, we follow some clues from the *Museu da Pessoa* and its methodology of the Social Technology of Memory.¹³

The *Museu da Pessoa*¹ was the first Brazilian virtual museum that emerged in 1991 from the initiative of Karen Workman, Ricardo Esteves Ribeiro and Luciana Hashiba. Since its origins, the Museum of the Person has aimed to collect, preserve and share life stories of ordinary people, creating a space where these stories can be valued and transformed into part of the collective history of humanity. Many of these stories are neglected by historical records in Brazil and by traditional cultural institutions. Throughout its 30-year history, the *Museu da Pessoa* has been a reference for researchers and scholars, playing a significant role in giving voice to and valuing Brazilian diversity. These stories help build an inclusive and comprehensive narrative of Brazilian history. For this reason, the *Projeto Brasileiros em Israel* was inspired by the Museum of the Person and, since 2022, has itself become an extension of this museum when it is configured as *Núcleo Brasileiros em Israel*— *Museu da Pessoa*.

In this sense, for the project/nucleus, the theme of “museological communication” works as an important theoretical and methodological reference. To this end, we find in the work of Marília X. Cury¹⁴ on “exhibitions” elements that contribute to answering the questions mentioned above. By analyzing face-to-face exhibitions, Cury identified interfaces and correlations between technique and language; i.e; relations between form and content, which seems relevant to us to think about the approximations between oral history and exposition. The formalization of oral history as a field of study dates back to the 20th century, based on concerns about the preservation of non-European cultures, which at that time were believed to be threatened with extinction. In the context of World War II, oral history gained strength mainly to record the testimonies of Holocaust survivors. Oral history is understood here as a theoretical methodological research approach and a form of historical narrative based on interviews and testimonies with people who lived through certain events. Within the scope of the *Brasileiros em Israel* project, it deals with the life history of Brazilians who immigrated to Israel at different times, from the 1950s to the present day, motivated by numerous factors such as social, ideological, economic, religious and others. It is through the collection of direct and personal oral reports that oral history seeks to capture and preserve individual and collective experiences, giving voice to the protagonists of these stories.^{15,16}

In 2005, the *Museu da Pessoa* systematized its experience in collecting and using life stories and conceived the Social Technology of Memory, based on oral history approaches such as that of Paul Thompson.¹⁷ This methodology starts from oral history and aims at recording, preserving and disseminating the collective memories of communities and groups. This approach plays an important role in building identities and strengthening social relationships, as by sharing and celebrating collective memories, communities can reconnect with their past, value their cultural roots and strengthen their social cohesion. This methodology is characterized by simplicity and replicability and is guided by principles that allow the recording of life stories through audio and video recording with a view to the elaboration of cultural products such as exhibitions, articles, books, etc. In short, it is “a set of contents and tools that encourage communities, civil society organizations and companies to build their history, intensifying their possibility of social intervention.”

In this sense, based on a conceptual base of oral history, the Museum of the Person established a series of technical and ethical

¹The *Museu da Pessoa* website presents its trajectory, virtual exhibitions, access to its collection, among other services.

²About the *Núcleo Brasileiros em Israel* and its actions.

procedures and organized steps to be followed to guarantee, from the selection of volunteers and the adequate understanding of the registration and use of testimonies, to the storage and subsequent preservation and dissemination of life stories. This whole process is mediated by technological tools and today everything is based on native digital archives, as is the case of the collection that has been formed within the scope of the Núcleo Brasileiros in Israel.

Brazilian Project in Israel: some aspects

Thus, here we try to report synthetically what we have done so far.

The Project Brazilians in Israel: Memories and Diversity project was conceived to identify aspects of this migration and contribute to the debate on social memory and Jewish studies in an interdisciplinary approach.

If the Jewish presence in Brazil is secular and dates back to the 16th century, the same cannot be said about the presence of Brazilians in Israel, which goes back to the origins of the Israeli nation itself. According to Meir Chazan,¹⁸ the first Brazilians in Israel, linked to the Dror youth movement, made their aliyah in 1950 and in 1952 the immigrants began to settle in the Bror Chail, known as “the Brazilians’ kibbutz”. Thus, Brazilians have been immigrating to Israel since the first decades of the 20th century, with an increase in the flow from 1970 onwards.

As mentioned at the beginning of this article, currently around 17,000 Brazilians live in Israel, with a majority of Jews among them. According to Póvoa and Paula¹⁹ the motivations are numerous: economic, security, quality of life, education and health issues, as well as the issue of cultural and religious identity. Póvoa²⁰ recognizes that there are many differences and asymmetries between them, but identifies symmetrical elements such as the Jewish religious and cultural issue that would make them similar, without, however, configuring a homogeneous whole.

Thus, in 2020 we effectively started our work with the formation of a network of Brazilian and Israeli researchers interested in investigating the community of Brazilian immigrants living in Israel and their memories, motivated at first by the lack of museums dedicated to the Brazilian community in Israel. Perry and Kark affirmed that conceptually “[...] ethnographic museums pose a challenge to the hegemonic Zionist story, which from its outset has been striving to unify the range of Jewish communities under a single ethnic rubric” For the purposes of their studies, “ethnographic museums” were considered those “[...] open to the public that displays objects of everyday life from the material culture of the recent past [...]”. From the universe of 34 ethnographic museums in Israel, these researchers established five types: National Museums (5 museums), Museums of Jewish Communities (14 museums), Museums of Arab-Palestinian Communities (5 museums), Museums of Druze, Bedoin or Circassian Communities (6 museums) and Museums of a location (4 museums). There is not space here to go into detail about each of them. What is interesting to recover from this study is that the authors verified that in the case of Jewish community museums or “single-community Jewish museums” as they are called, the exhibitions of these institutions emphasize the integration with the State of Israel and highlight the contributions that each one of the communities represented in the museum have shaped Israeli society.

This refers, in part, to a face-to-face exhibition that took place in Brazil called “Brazilians in Israel”, conceived in 2019 by the Centro de Memória do Museu Judaico de São Paulo. This exhibition mainly highlighted distinguished Brazilians who visited Israel, as well as

some of their contributions to that country. Considering all this and in addition to the literature research on the theme “Brazilians in Israel”, which we found to be scarce, in 2021 we developed a questionnaire on Google forms. Organized in two parts, it contained 28 questions: the first part explored census data and the second explored aspects related to memories. The form had 336 responses and, in the end, 200 respondents registered their contacts. If our study points to the complexity, regional dispersion and diversity among respondents, as well as to the difficulty of taking these immigrants as a homogeneous community, as Póvoa and Almeida pointed out, the theme of food (Brazilian food) emerged between one of the questions in the questionnaire. The question “What do you miss about Brazil” had multiple answer alternatives, with the answer “I miss my family” appearing in 1st place (74% of respondents); 2nd place “I miss my friends” (72%) and 3rd place “missing Brazilian food”, marked by 62% of respondents.

After the questionnaire, we started the interviews with the volunteers who left their contacts, a phase still in progress. The methodology for analyzing the content of the interviews is based on the constructivist and qualitative model with an approach that seeks to capture what people have to say in their own words. In the survey, the interviewees recount memories of the past and present facts, expressing their longing for being Brazilian and adapting to the new reality.

Quantitative analysis has made it possible to categorize the content of the interviews, apprehending the multidimensional character of the phenomena in different perspectives of the lived experience.²¹ This includes preparing the interview according to the theme that emerged in the questionnaire (missing Brazilian food). The second stage of the analysis consists of transcribing the interviews to systematize the content. The microanalysis of parts of individual texts has allowed exploring these memories related to the theme of food, gastronomy, nostalgia for culinary objects. In the categorization, themes such as celebrating birthdays and rice and beans were addressed by all respondents so far.

Of the total of 200 questionnaire respondents who left their contacts, 40 of them agreed to participate in the 2nd stage of the interviews to record their life stories. There are 40 Brazilian men and women, volunteers in this project, who went to Israel at different times and who want to share aspects of their trajectories. For this, we use the methodological approach developed by the Museu da Pessoa. From the beginning of the project until today, we have been able to record 12 life stories.

The result of the questionnaire, linked to the content of some interviews, indicated central themes used in the production of an itinerant face-to-face exhibition entitled *Açaí & Tamaras: saudades da Comida Brasileira em Israel*, inaugurated in May 2022 at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Consisting of 18 panels, it addresses topics such as a brief overview of Jewish immigration to Brazil, migratory waves of Brazilians to Israel, aspects of Brazilian food in Israel. Through the project, we have been able to locate places where Brazilian food products are sold and consumed, such as cheese bread, brigadeiro, kasher feijoada, açaí, among others. With that, in addition to interesting testimonials, we located and created a map of Israel with some of these places.

These memories that brought up the “rice and beans” also revealed the “territorialization” of Brazilian culture. Associated with popular Brazilian cuisine, such as cheese bread, brigadeiro and açaí, we located places that reflect cultural aspects of these immigrants, “historizing”

and “geographicalizing” their presence in Israeli territory in bars, cafes, kiosks on the beach, etc.²²

Conclusion

The Brazilians in Israel: Memories and Diversity project has since 2020 been articulating a network of researchers to investigate the community of Brazilian immigrants living in that country. Formulated as an academic and cultural project, it focuses on recording the memories of these immigrants through their life stories. The digital collection of these memories, which is still being constituted, is under the care of the Núcleo Brasileiros em Israel, an extension of the Museu da Pessoa. Giving visibility to these stories is part of the objectives of this initiative, which also aims to highlight the Brazilian community that lives in Israel and its diversity. Studies on museological communication, virtual exhibitions, oral history and the use of the Social Technology of Memory methodology are among the theoretical and conceptual approaches that guided this project.

The in-person exhibition experience Açaí & Tâmaras highlighted the need for a virtual exhibition that allows thematic access to life stories and that can be accessed by anyone, in any location, going beyond the geographical limits of a face-to-face exhibition. Circumscribed in this context, this initiative proposes an action-research whose main objectives are: to organize, catalogue, script and analyze the oral histories, which are part of the collection of the Núcleo Brasileiros in Israel, with a view to identifying exhibition axes, lines curatorial and narrative elements, as well as to outline general aspects of the virtual version of the exhibition itself, such as thematic circuits and the choice of digital documents (audio, video, text, image) to integrate the exhibition and monitor its development on the web. But these are aspects to be reflected on in the future.

Finally, places like Jerusalem and Tel Aviv (central region of Israel), where there is a greater concentration of Brazilians, the manifestation of Brazilian culture – idiomatic, gastronomic and social – shows expressions of this identity in the territory. But there is still much to deepen in this regard.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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