

# O LUGAR JUDAICO NA OBRA DE MOACYR SCLiar: MEMORIA E NARRATIVIDADE THE JEWISH PLACE IN MOACYR SCLiar'S WORK: MEMORY AND NARRATIVITY

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How to quote this text: Duarte, C. and Sancovschi, I., 2017. The Jewish place in Moacyr Scliar's work: memory and narrativity V!RUS, 15. [e-journal] [online] Available at: <[http://www.nomads.usp.br/virus/\\_virus15/?sec=4&item=3&lang=en](http://www.nomads.usp.br/virus/_virus15/?sec=4&item=3&lang=en)>. [Accessed: 12 December 2017].

## Abstract

The aim of the current study is to present a case study that investigated the "Jewish Place" as a collective place built in the imagination of diasporic people. Based on the case study it was possible showing that narratives - including literary and fictional ones - trigger, build and put memories in continuity; thus, they are able to reaffirm and consolidate the understanding about an imaginary collective place connecting individuals, even if they are dispersed in the physical territory. Therefore, we herein reflect about affective memory construction and preservation processes involved in the consolidation of Places, as well as address the key role narratives play in these processes. The present study is based on the analysis of space subjectivities through the reading of two Moacyr Scliar's works, which seem to delimit a specific cultural place centrally experienced by Jewish characters.

**Keywords:** Collective memory, Narrative, Ambience, Judaism

## 1 Introduction

The advances and barriers created by what we now understand as globalization process have been discussed in several knowledge fields such as architecture. The essay by Frampton (1982), who sets a dialogue with the text written by Paul Ricoeur ([1961], 1968) - entitled "Universal Civilization and National Cultures" -, became a benchmark in the architecture field. Ricoeur's text presents a paradox: "how to become modern and to return to sources; how to revive an old, dormant civilization and take part in universal civilization? ..." (RICOEUR *apud* FRAMPTON, 2003.p.381). Although Ricoeur remains reticent about the result of a dialogue culture that enables new encounters, he takes away the idea of a colonizing encounter, which has been successively implemented to meet diversity and increasingly promote the universalization phenomenon. Thus, Frampton's proposition lies precisely on the dialogue, since he establishes six points to be adopted in an architecture able to withstand the homogeneity inherent to modern society, which is progressively advancing.

The essay by Frampton opened a discussion that remains current in the architecture field<sup>1</sup>, nowadays. In this sense, our research sought reference in places built in the imagination, which are set as resistance to the universalization of cities and inhabited places.

This research focused its case study on the Jewish culture - a culture that remains relevant throughout times, reinvents itself and remains alive despite several deterritorialization and assimilation processes. Within the paradox - "to be modern and to

return to sources" -, we investigated characteristics configuring the idea of a specific cultural place able to transcend the advancements imposed by modernity. In other words, he pursued the perception about a cultural place able to stand out among other places.

Thus, it is worth questioning whether this Place would be built from a "collective memory" (HALBWACHS, 1990) by reaffirming and consolidating itself through real and imagined ambiances; a virtual place that, although not constituting a physical territory, would spread itself in a symbolic territory representing an "imagined community" (ANDERSON, 2008)<sup>2</sup>, the feeling of belonging.

The herein adopted methodological instrument comprised a literary analysis about consensus - of a subjective understanding about space - to find a place of cultural resistance. The research underlying the current article made us reflect about memory and narrativity, and allowed finding great narrative contributions to processes such as building affective memories and strengthening collective ones. At the end of the research, it was possible concluding that narratives, even literary and fictional ones, are able to trigger, "build" and put into continuity memories composing an imaginary collective Place, which, like other imaginary places, complete the configuration of contemporary cities.

## **2 Narratives building the contemporary world.**

It is necessary understanding what we herein mean by narrative and its relations in order to address (real and imaginary) spaces and places, which are built and consolidated by means of oral or written narratives.

Barthes ([1966] 1976) addressed several forms of narratives, as well as how different human groups are bound to them. According to this author, narrative has always existed as an important way of conveying ideas and as a strong bond to interpersonal relations. Narrative goes beyond national, temporal and cultural boundaries. Barthes also addressed the renewal and multiplication of narrative forms in the contemporary world. According to him, the narrative imperative, which appears to be insurmountable nowadays, was not always seen like that. After discussing about the importance and the refinement of narrative construction in an article entitled "The Storyteller", Benjamin ([1936] 1987) advocates that modernity would foster the expansive disappearance of the narrator's figure.

*One reason for this phenomenon is obvious: experience has fallen in value. And it looks as if it is continuing to fall into bottomlessness. [...] Was it not noticeable at the end of the war that men returned from the battlefield grown silent - not richer, but poorer in communicable experience? (BENJAMIN, 1987, p198).*

It is true that somber moments have been silent and continue to silence storytellers. As for the specific group addressed in the current research - the Jews -, the generation who lived through the traumatic Holocaust experience remained silent for years and deprived a whole generation of their narratives, of their testimony. Nowadays, however, it is known that such testimony is essential to the continuity of people and mankind's history. Thus, we believe that the rescue of the "ability to exchange experiences" (BENJAMIN, 1987) highlights lived and built memories, and leads us to experience the place of the other by relativizing our own places, or by building and consolidating imaginary places, as shown in our case study. Thus, narratives have become important pieces in the construction of the contemporary world, as well as in the construction of contemporary cities, since they are a form of testimony, denunciation, as well as of identity and cultural reaffirmation, which allows understanding our own spaces and places.

Paul Ricoeur (2008) makes a close approach to the concept of narrative itself and discusses the approximation between historical and narrative temporality, although attentive to memory matters. According to Ricoeur, only the narrative, which proposes a sequential ordering of scattered events, allows understanding the human-time (historical time) experience. The narrative allows us to think about our temporality, our historicity. However, the association among time, narrative and space, proposed by Ricoeur, draws the attention of researchers from the Architecture and Urbanism field.

In "Memory, History and Forgetting", Ricoeur (2008) addresses the *inhabited space* issue, in which he associates the destiny of space with the destiny of time. "In passing from memory to historiography, the space in which the protagonists of a recounted history move and the time in which the told events unfold conjointly change their sign." (RICOEUR, 2008, p.156). This cross between time and space is exemplified by Ricoeur through the expression: "I was there".

*The use of the grammatical imperfect tense in French indicates the time, while the adverb marks the space. Together the here and there of the lived space of perception and of action, and the before of the lived time of memory, find themselves framed within a system of places and dates where the reference to the here and absolute now of lived experience is eliminated. (RICOEUR, 2008. p.156).*

It is exactly the interlocking between concepts such as time and space, crossed by one another, what enables sustaining a story (a narrative), which will convey the testimony of the individual, or collective experience of places we live in, how we live and what we expect. Therefore, it is possible stating that narratives (whether they are literary or not) are the testimony about the individual and collective experience of the storyteller, who lived and expected in a certain time and space.

In "Architecture and Narrativity", Ricoeur (1998) further deepens the association among time, narrative and space. The author draws a parallel between architecture and narrativity, in which "architecture would be to space what narrative is to time" (RICOEUR, 1998, p.44). By adopting the same frameworks of analysis used in "Time and Narrative" (RICOEUR, 1994), the author shows that architecture and narrativity constitute parallel movements, wherein narrativity is described in time and architecture is described in space. Thus, we herein follow the three stages mentioned by the author. In "prefiguration",

narrative is associated with everyday life, whereas architecture is linked to the act of dwelling. In "configuration", narrative and everyday life move, whereas the narrated time is built through literary forms; an effectively interventionist stage linked to the act of building is set in the space sphere, namely: the architectural project. Finally, the third stage mentioned by the author is "refiguration", which sets a reading and re-reading situation, which also occurs in the space sphere; the reading and re-reading of cities and of all housing places is set in such sphere.

Ricoeur (1998) also addresses the possibility of an even truer interlocking between the architectural "configuration" of space and the narrative "configuration" of time:

*In other words, it is really a matter of crossing space and time through building and recounting. Such is the horizon of this investigation: to entangle the spatiality of the narrative and temporality of the architectural act by the exchange, as it were, of space-time in both directions. We will also be able to find, in time, as we are led by the architectural act's temporality, the dialectic of memory and project at the very heart of this activity. (RICOEUR, 1998, p.44).*

Thus, we herein follow this shuffle between time and space. However, we pursue the dialectic of memory and design in the narrative rather than in architecture. In order to do so, we take the architectural design, mentioned by Ricoeur, not only as "architectural design in its technical sense, but mainly to the design of places resulting from collective and individual aspirations of mankind" (DUARTE et.al, 2007). Accordingly, narrative would also function as the architectural act, which builds places in the imagination; these places, according to our point of view, trigger memories and reverberate in the collective imagination, in the collective memory, through the "refiguration" stage. Thus, during the "prefiguration" stage, the narrative would be linked to everyday life, to the act of dwelling; whereas during the "configuration" stage, a literary form would encompass the memory of experienced time and space, in order to build the reflections of the everyday life and of the act of dwelling in the imagination. Finally, in the "refiguration" stage, narrative reading and re-reading would consolidate the imaginary places it has built. Thus, our research meets Ricoeur's thought that "the narrative form projects the remembered past onto the future" (RICOEUR, 1998, p.45).

The current study deals with consolidated narratives, i.e., narratives already in the "refiguration" stage. Therefore, we believe that by following - through reading and re-reading - the narratives in Moacyr Scliar's work, we experience a past remembered in the present, fact that helps consolidating its place in the future imagination. Thus, we maintain that the "Jewish Place" emerging from the narratives is able to link past, present and future, by projecting itself as an "imaginary collective Place".

### **3 Understanding spaces based on their complexity**

After understanding narrative-related issues involved in time, space and culture relations, we move towards more familiar concepts in the Architecture and Urbanism field and in its professional practice.

In sociology, Castells (1999) defines space as "the material support of time-sharing social practices" (CASTELLS 1999, p.500). Thus, social life and space are inseparable; however, the aforementioned author addresses space as an inert matter, as support for relations happening therein".

Thus, we have sought in the humanist geography by Tuan (1983) an experiential perspective able to determine the understanding of space (and place) in its relationship with the body, with the individual. According to Tuan, what is meant by space - broad, open, without definitions - ends up becoming a Place as we acknowledge it and give it meaning. The space-meaning and identification process takes place through experience; it may happen in an individualized and intuitive way<sup>3</sup>, or even intentionally<sup>4</sup>, when human beings and spaces are symbiotically constituted. Since we are interested in individual-individual relations (present in space), as well as in individual-space relations, we made the option for approaching the idea of relational space, according to which space is support, but also agent.

This concept of space led us to the concept of Sensitive Ambience<sup>5</sup>. Ambience works as mediator; it intermediates<sup>5</sup> and is intermediated by relations between individual(s) and space, with emphasis to social and cultural relations set therein. This concept allows understanding space not only in its physical dimension, but also in sensitive, sensorial and dynamic dimensions. "Ambience is both subjective and objective: it involves the lived experience of people as well as the built environment of the place" (THIBAUD, 2011. p.1). Therefore, the lived experience would be an abstraction experience based on several visual, tactile, kinetic or sound dimensions, which materialize socio-cultural relations found in the space interacting with the built environment, thus constituting ambiances. In our opinion, ambiances are an essential element to help better understanding the space-individual relation, rather than a complex way of understanding spaces.

By accepting that places are constituted of meanings attributed to them by means of subjectivities inscribed in each cultural group, we understand that each of these groups builds an "identification place" for itself or even an understanding of its "place of belonging"; in the present case - the "Jewish Place". According to Stock (2006), "identification places" are set based on the practice of places<sup>6</sup>, which we understand through the experience, rituals, and the daily actions found in spaces. Thus, if the practice of places builds "identification places", it is possible stating that the ambiances surrounding these practices and places reaffirm and strengthen the bonds between individuals and space. Therefore, ambiances, rather than the actions in their spatial supports, play a fundamental role in the construction of identities and symbolic territories.

### **4 Imagined paths: an ethnotopography through literature.**

Since we adopted the spaces narrated in the literature as object of study and made the option for an experiential approach, it was necessary developing a research methodology able to allow approaching the sensitive dimension through the reading of the herein proposed texts in order to have an approximate experience of the narrated spaces.

The herein developed methodology adopted as starting point the "sensitive reading" of the literary texts; it was done because such reading provides a body-text approximation, thus taking readers to a sensorial reading experience through their sensitive memory. In order to do so, we relied on two art and literature theorists.

Writer and art critic Susan Sontag (1964) was against the idea of "conscious interpretation" of the work of art; she suggested that the "reading" of the work of art, whatever it may be, should focus on knowing how it is, instead of on what it means. "What is important now is to recover our senses. We must learn to *see* more, to *hear* more, to *feel* more [...] In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art" (SONTAG, 1964, p.10). Thus, the author proposes a sensible approximation between body and art, or between body and text.

Similarly, literary theorist Gumbrecht (2014) advocates that the reading of literary texts should be based on a sensory experience – "reading for the Stimmung". According to the aforementioned author, the reading based on this principle is able to make the ambience of another place present in us. By focusing on the ambiances and atmospheres, readers claim for themselves the vitality and aesthetic proximity of something distant or missing. "The aim is to follow atmosphere and environment configurations in order to find otherness in intense and intimate forms" (GUMBRECHT, 2014, p.22).

Thus, the sensitive reading allows traveling an "imagined path" that leads us to experience spaces inscribed in literary narratives. The methodology developed in the current study is based on the ambience analysis method called "commented paths" (THIBAUD, 2002). The "Imagined Path" is based on three stages, namely: reading, "walking" and perceiving. The "Sensitive Reading" allows tracing fictional paths, imaginary journeys, within the spaces represented in the narratives. However, when we start the journey, we do not have a defined path. Through the readings, we launch ourselves into the proposed spaces. We walk through them like "flâneurs" (strollers) in the city, by cutting paths and feeling their ambiances.

Thus, through the imagined paths, we experience the spaces inscribed in two Moacyr Scliar's works in order to find cultural significations impregnated in the ambiances of these spaces, which build and consolidate memories through the narrative "refiguration" process, by establishing the idea of an imaginary collective place; in the present case, "the Jewish Place".

## **5 Experiencing Jewish ambiances in Scliar's work**

When one talks about the study of cities, spaces or places through the literature, it is common seeing the use of a literature of memories, or a viatic literature. However, we herein made the option for using fictional literature, in which the material and the imaginary planes blend together, trigger lived memories and build new ones. Thus, the "Jewish Place" we seek to find, like the Jewish identity or Jewishness, is a process undergoing permanent transformation - as a becoming - and it is always between the material and the imaginary planes; therefore, it is between "being modern and returning to sources".

Moacyr Scliar and his work were chosen as the object of the current study mainly because we aimed at understanding the Jewish condition through the cultural belonging perspective, rather than through the religious one<sup>7</sup>.

Son of European emigrants, Scliar was born in Porto Alegre City and spent most of his childhood in Bom Fim neighborhood. Part of his school education took place in a Yiddish School and the other part of it, in a Catholic High School. Even though he lived in a Jewish community, he had intense contact with the Brazilian culture and literature. He won several awards and was named member of the Brazilian Academy of Letters. Scliar is considered one of the most representative writers of contemporary Brazilian literature, since his themes range from urban social reality in Brazil to medicine. However, it is worth highlighting that his Jewish status strongly influences his work and includes him in the contemporary Jewish literature category.

Moacyr Scliar's works analyzed in the current research take us to a walk through Bom Fim neighborhood, in Porto Alegre City. The books "The War in Bom Fim" (SCLIAR, 2014), released in 1972, and "The One-Man Army" (SCLIAR, 2012), released in 1973, depict an experience built between the author's lived and fantasized memories.

In "The War in Bom Fim", Scliar opens his narrative by introducing us to a place that has its own identity. In the aforementioned book, Bom Fim was an independent country, where life was lived in a different way. The boundaries were clear.

*Let us consider Bom Fim a country – a small country, not a neighborhood in Porto Alegre. It is bounded, on the North, by the Windmills hills; on the West, by downtown; on the East, by the African Colony, and, farther on, by Petrópolis and Três Figueiras; on the South, by the Várzea plain, from which it is separated by Oswaldo Aranha Avenue (SCLIAR, 2014, p.21).*

Scliar uses a narrative that mixes history and fantasy to portray the life of the Jews in Bom Fim, as well as their everyday lives and the impact from memories lived in Europe, and mainly from the outbreak of World War II and the advance of Nazi troops. In this Scliar's work, children fight against the Nazi invasions and strongly resist to the attempts of eliminating the Jews. The idea of bringing together two distinct times in a single place also marks an interesting trait of the herein revealed Jewish identity.

The "de-re-territorialization" (HASBAERT, 2001) theme lived in the aforementioned work is shared by the second Scliar's work analyzed in the current study. The same "country" - Bom Fim - is the scene of "The One-Man Army", wherein the Captain - the

personification of the *Foreign Jew* (SIMMEL, 1983), "a persecuted man whose pain for being excluded is depicted in his actions [...]" (SZKLO, 1990. p.64) - lives a failed attempt to create utopia. "The One-Man Army" presents a constant conflict between the everyday life of the lived place and the expectation of a "promised land". The Captain lives his life between the daily life in Bom Fim, through the coexistence with acquainted Jews, and the project of creating a Jewish core, a national home. He lives the illusion of a better world, among equal men, where exploiters or exploited people do not exist<sup>8</sup>.

*In his novels, Scliar evokes precisely this moment of rupture in which the Jewish town, in its traditional form – herein depicted through Bom Fim neighborhood in the 30s and 40s - oscillates between a past that hopelessly escapes it and an unforeseeable future. (SZKLO, 1990, p.70).*

As a way of illustrating the results of the current research, we herein present two Scliar narrative excerpts that, by triggering a collective memory, present characteristics that give meaning to the spaces of the everyday Jewish life in Porto Alegre, during and after World War II.

In the first excerpt, it is possible noticing a double temporality experienced in the Jewish life spaces; however, it is also possible seeing references of the symbolic spatiality and sensoriality belonging to the Jewish culture:

*Suddenly, Sunday comes. No one works; no one works on Saturday or Sunday. Saturday is a holiday in Bom Fim country, Sunday is a holiday in Brazil. Saturday morning, people go to the synagogue. On Sunday, the family accommodates itself in the carriage and goes to Três Figueiras to have a picnic. "Malke Tube" trots gracefully, Samuel sings in Yiddish, Joel calls and waves to his friends, Nathan smiles, Shendl feeds them with sandwiches and apples. They go down Fernandes Vieira Street, turn left at Oswaldo Aranha Avenue, pass by the Primary Care Center, wave to a nurse - a mulatto woman dressed in white -, pass by Polo Field, by Rio Branco Movie Theater, and by Força e Luz Soccer Field. They are already out of Bom Fim; as they climb the Middle Path, the houses become scarce and bushes begin to appear. Then, they pass by the palace of petrified Jews. (SCLIAR, 2014, p.54).*

The excerpt above informs us that, on Saturdays, life changes in Bom Fim. What transforms this routine, this experience, this space, is a weekly Jewish ritual called Sabbath, which is a holiday in Bom Fim "country". The synagogue represents the place of meeting, rites, as well as of rest. Sunday is a holiday in Brazil and no one works in Bom Fim, as well; however, the ambience surrounding this day is different. The synagogue is not a reference in this day. On Sundays, families go out for a walk beyond the boundaries of Bom Fim; they take their music, sounds, food and smells to the outside spaces as if they were carrying their places and temporalities along with them. Throughout the way, they acknowledge spaces inhabited by Jews who make the option for living outside the community, i.e., the "petrified Jews". It leads us to the duality between "modernity and tradition" and shows that the belief in a divine power is part of the life of Jews living in Bom Fim.

Thus, the excerpt presented above leads us to look at the Jewish Place based on specific temporal references, which are built in the duality between Jewish and non-Jewish temporalities. As for spatiality, it is possible seeing that this place has its own symbolic references and landmarks delimiting some boundaries, which, despite everything, may be broken or overcome by sensorial features. Thus, recognizing paths through places inhabited by other Jews, and having the synagogue as momentary reference, delimits a space of belonging that seems to extend its boundaries through a sensoriality that also marks the Jewish place through sounds (such as songs, accents or words in Yiddish), smells and tastes (of Jewish and European food).

The "alien" feeling, the feeling of non-belonging, or even more definitely, the feeling of absence that follows the Jewish individual in another excerpt is a strong reference to the Jewish Place:

*Captain Birobidjan floats motionless, half drowned in this Sea. Silent little men stare at him from the pier.*

*Birobidjan's hand hits something hard: the keel of a boat. Instantly reanimated, he climbs aboard the small sailboat.*

*Nobody is there. The Captain gets ready to leave. One day, he will be pictured like this: standing in the front part of the boat, holding his head high and his piercing gaze probing the darkness: one day, when there is time for art. (SCLIAR, 2012, p.5).*

The excerpt above depicts the moment of arrival in Brazil. Jews who arrive, mostly from European countries, seem to feel alone, lost in a "vast sea". Like the Captain, "they float motionless and half drowned". Therefore, when the Jews arrive in Bom Fim, they settle in an ambience of uncertainty, immensity and solitude. However, as the narrative shows, "standing in the front part of the boat, holding his head high and his piercing gaze probing the darkness", the Jew goes ahead even in the face of immensity and darkness. He attempts to explore the new space, by organizing a structure and a communal occupation in the physical space, which is reinforced by the symbolic characteristics therein established. In addition, the character's nickname, Captain Birobidjan<sup>9</sup>, evidences the immense desire for the "Promised Land".

## **6 The consolidation of the imaginary place.**

The two excerpts presented above are illustrations of a long analysis applied to the herein selected Moacyr Scliar's works<sup>10</sup>. The research underlying the current article found that as literary narratives, even the fictional ones, portray the Jewish

practices of places by describing ambiances through their sensitive and cultural features, they end up triggering an empathy in the reader, which is able to elicit collective, lived and built memories. Therefore, literature brings to the reader the representation of a symbolic territory, which is imagined and characterized by the Jewish culture.

The sensitive reading allowed finding the following features in the narratives: temporality - it establishes a double temporal experience of space, which, on the one hand, is marked by daily and specific rituals of the Jewish culture, and on the other hand, by daily and specific rituals of other cultures; spatiality - it sets distances between community, ritual and everyday places, besides establishing internal and external borders; sensoriality - it materializes a sacred dimension of Jewish rituals in space, as well as a profane dimension of daily and interpersonal relations; and sensitivity - it highlights strangeness and absence feelings in spaces.

To our understanding, the "refiguration" stage in Scliar's narrative, as proposed by Ricoeur (1998), makes the reader relive and rebuild memories, which are common to a specific group. This process ends up delimiting a symbolic territory acknowledged in several locations, thus bringing to light the concept of Imaginary Jewish Place. This Place remains alive in a virtual space, where the cultural feeling is strongly linked to its sources, thus finding the balance between "being modern and returning to sources".

In fact, our research found that territoriality and cultural identity may be understood - and even felt - from the ambiances referenced by literature. Accordingly, we advocate that narratives not only make relevant contributions to processes involving the construction and preservation of personal and collective memories, as well as of distinct spaces and places; they are also a relevant tool for studies focused on proposing the subjective and memorial understanding of spaces, since this understanding is important to city design and transformation processes.

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**1** Under the original title "Towards a Critical regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance". Initially published in *Perspecta: The Yale Architectural Journal*, in 1982.

**2** We herein refer to the concept used by Anderson (2008), who presents the imagined community as one whose its members do not have a face-to-face relationship. Although the term is used to characterize nations referenced in a physical territory, we understand that the "Jewish community", although spread over several physical territories, makes reference to a symbolic territory.

**3** We herein refer to the sensitive intuition defined by Kant. "Sensitive is the Intuition of every finite thinking being, to which the object is given: it is therefore passivity, affection" (apud ABBAGNANO, 1998). Intuition may be attributed to man and considered experience as the acknowledgement of a present object, i.e., as perception. (ABBAGNANO, 1998. p.582).

**4** As intentional, we herein refer to culture-mediated meanings; we understand culture as in White's approach (WHITE; DILLINGHAM 2009), for whom the ability to "symbologize" involves the possibility of creating, assigning and understanding meanings.

**5** The Sensitive Ambience concept has been studied and developed by an international network (The International Ambiances Network), which performs researches in the field of ambiances in urban and architectural spaces. The network is focused on promoting the sensorial domain in researches and projects of inhabited spaces.

**6** We herein use the direct translation of the French term "pratiques des lieux", used by Stock; the term refers to the uses and forms of using spaces. See: STOCK, Mathis (2006).

**7** In seeking to understand the balance between modernity and tradition, we exclude the religious perspective, since it generally tends to isolate itself in order to remain faithful to its roots and precepts.

**8** The fantasy of an egalitarian place herein refers to the Kibbutzian ideals.

**9** The reference used by Scliar is a mixture between the idea of Jewish colonies before the foundation of the State of Israel and the Kibbutz movement; in the final analysis, Birobidjan represented a "promised land", a National Home.

**10** The research also included the analysis of works by two other authors from the contemporary Jewish literature.