

Sexual Commerce and Transnational Experiences in South America at the Beginning of the Twentieth Century

This article focuses on the transnational experiences of a specific group of European women associated with prostitution who lived in Brazilian and Argentinean cities at the beginning of the twentieth century. Although those women are considered in historiography as part of the “white slave trade”, this text deals with other dimensions of their life and work experiences. I argue that the transnational dimension of social experiences of women identified as victims of pimps is fundamental in understanding their social networks and their strategies to deal with the prevailing social organisation of sexual commerce in each city. Their experiences also illustrate aspects of many other groups of immigrant workers in the period.



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Since the end of the nineteenth century, Buenos Aires and Rio de Janeiro were strongly connected through an unprecedented circulation of people, capital, ideas and practices. The flows of men and women, principally Europeans, between both cities have particularly sparked the interest of historians in Argentina and Brazil. Labour historians in both countries have broached the question of the international circulation of workers in order to understand anarchist and worker militancy in the period.¹ Historians of culture and sexuality have also noted the growing international transit of women linked to sexual commerce between both capital cities, interpreting it in terms of forced immigration in the context of the widespread histories of “white slavery”.²

In both cases, Brazilian historians have drawn on records of the expulsion of foreigners to sustain their interpretations. Their sources were the documentation that resulted from the passage of Gordo law, which gave the executive power the prerogative to expel foreigners through an administrative measure, therefore, without the necessity of a judicial process. For a long time, historians considered this expulsion legislation a mere reflection of the predominant politics of the period known as the First Republic in relation to social protest, when arbitrary measures by the executive power, martial law and the use of police force to deal with social question were well known. However, recent studies in the social history of work and the law, preoccupied with a growing interest in comparing different national experiences, have questioned this vision. Such studies have opened up a series of new interrogations about the construction of the legitimacy of expulsions in specific contexts.³

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Rio de Janeiro and Buenos Aires, as many cities in the western hemisphere, approved laws of expulsion that gave the executive power the right to define, incriminate and expel undesirable foreigners. As with other countries, expulsion was debated in the context of wider discussions about citizenship, nation and nationality. As a result of this and of the exclusion of the judicial power, the expulsion laws provoked recurrent polemics and questionings of their constitutionality. In both countries, they were contested several times over the years, but remained in force for many decades.

When the very procedures of accusation become objects of historical investigation, we can put aside the supposition that the histories of prostitution registered in the documents related to expulsion necessarily refer to the traffic in women, as in the expression used by journalists and police at the beginning of the twentieth century. By the same token, if we consider prostitution as an activity that organises identities and social hierarchies and that is inserted in ample social networks and informal economies, we can propose other questions that refer to work and to sociability. In this way, prostitution becomes a prism through which we can understand the social (and transnational) experiences of diverse groups of workers in the period.

As a result, the comings and goings between Rio de Janeiro and Buenos Aires of men and women associated with the practice and exploitation of sexual work are not considered here as proof of the existence of traffic in women, as many police and judicial authorities argued and which is reflected in certain recent histories, but as clues in interpreting the articulation of social networks between certain immigrant groups.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Rio de Janeiro and Buenos Aires, as in many cities in the western hemisphere, approved laws of expulsion that gave the executive power the right to define, incriminate and expel undesirable foreigners.⁴ As with other countries, expulsion was debated in the context of wider discussions about citizenship, nation and nationality.⁵ As a result of this and of the exclusion of the judicial power, the expulsion laws provoked recurrent polemics and questionings of their constitutionality. In both countries, they were contested several times over the years, but remained in force for many decades.

In Brazil as in Argentina, the process of expulsion remained in the hands of the police. But while in Argentina the process was rapid and summary (the police authority elaborated long

lists of expulsion that were transformed into ministerial decrees), in Brazil the instructions for the execution of the law established specific procedures. Beyond the ample and undefined “threat to national security” that targeted political militants, the law also mentioned as motives for expulsion “vagrancy, mendicity and competently verified pimping”. In the first two cases, being caught in the act was sufficient proof to be imprisoned. In the case of pimping, a police investigation that gathered at least “two testimonies” was required.⁶ Therefore, in contrast to the Argentinean case, in which expulsion decrees could be collective, in Brazil the decrees were individual and followed a “judicial” format.⁷

In practice, it is quite probable that in both the countries many anarchist suspects or any other foreigner under the scrutiny of police prosecution ended up expelled with no regards to formalities. For many contemporaries committed to the defense of foreigners faced with the violent initiatives of the police, it was not particularly important in some cases whether the expulsions followed a formal path. For them, what was at work in any case was the same illegal practice on the part of the executive power.⁸ However, the records produced in the Brazilian case raises the question of the construction of the legitimacy of expulsions, evident in the procedural preoccupation. But principally, for the historian these records open up many possibilities to scrutinise the social experience of many men and women that exceed the question of expulsion itself.



Polish Women

The records of Brazilian expulsions demonstrate the construction and consolidation of certain common meanings regarding the identity of pimping in South America, especially the idea that it was a foreign phenomenon. European immigrants, particularly of Jewish origin, who lived in Buenos Aires or Montevideo before moving to Rio and who cohabited with prostitutes were easy targets of police investigations; such immigrants were easily turned as targets of expulsion measures, without passing through the legal procedures of the regular charge of pimping, an offence included in the penal code of 1890. For this reason, the common features of men accused of pimping in expelling processes, such as being Jewish, “Russians” and French, having had spent some “suspect” period in the Southern Cone and having declared themselves small businessmen, cannot be taken as evidence of the organisation of the traffic in women or of the profile of traffickers.⁹ Considered in the context of their production, these records show first the functioning of the mechanisms and routines of police suspicion. Second, and indirectly, they indicate the social experiences of immigrant groups who fell under police suspicion.

In the records produced by the police in Rio from 1907 onwards, it is not only possible to look at the meanings of the reference to other countries in the construction of the accusation of pimping, but also to examine the meanings of the travel of the accused for other countries. In this sense, the references to time spent in Buenos Aires in the processes of Brazilian expulsions not only help to clarify the construction of the accusation of undesirable, but also allude to the

meanings of international dislocation and the sojourn in Buenos Aires in the lives of the men and women associated with the practice and exploitation of sexual commerce.

Naturally, documents tend to show more about the mechanisms of accusation than the trajectory or social experience of the accused. To expel the thirty-two year old New Yorker, Max Burckner, one of the first victims of the 1907 law, the police precinct chief arrested him under the accusation of:

not exercising any profession, craft or business in which one licitly gains a life, nor having means of subsistence and correct domicile, and to be accused of exercising pimping.¹⁰

The amplitude of this accusation converged in the intention of the police precinct chief to characterise the suspect as a non-worker. The accusation of the authorities, reiterated by the declarations of two other policemen, the evidence that Burckner was in the country for less than two years and, finally, the time he spent in Buenos Aires, completed “the process”. We end up knowing less about the life of Max Burckner than about the paths of police accusation.

More revealing is the case of the Austrian Mauricio Goldran, 38 years old, who was expelled in 1912. The police brought together the declaration of who would become the principal element of incrimination, his wife, a prostitute in São Paulo, and the statements of two chauffeurs and a woman who lived in the same house of prostitution as his wife. The intention of the police precinct chief was to prove that Goldran exploited his own wife, which was reinforced by an identification bulletin sent by the police in Buenos Aires, which stated that Goldran was known there “as a pimp and dangerous thief”.¹¹

As in this and other cases, police investigation reiterated the notion that there was a circuit between the capitals used by more or less dangerous criminals. The reference to the antecedents of Goldran in Buenos Aires, which consisted of an observation at the end of an identification file produced by the Secretary of Public Security of São Paulo, functioned as an element of confirmation and legitimacy of police suspicions. This was despite the fact that neither in Buenos Aires nor in São Paulo was there any record of a conviction against Goldran. Dangerous thieves and ruffians became sufficient and interchangeable definitions to define the Austrian as undesirable. The interpretation of these examples of international circulation as symptoms of the condemnable behaviour was fed on stories, more or less sensationalist, about pimps and other criminals who acted internationally, circulating with impunity in the port cities of the Southern Cone. The strategy of the expelled in disembarking in the closest port to return to the city and therefore dupe the precarious police control of the borders ended up functioning to reinforce this idea.¹²

As the process of expulsion was administrative and not judicial, the accusation ends up referring to a diversity of behaviours more than to a particular offence. Robbery, theft, living with prostitutes, and a broad idea of dangerousness were combined with reference to Buenos Aires as the place in which an unknown past becomes concrete as the scenario of the morally condemnable lives of these threatening foreigners.

In the statements of the witnesses, however, the city assumes other dimensions. The Argentinean Adelia Francatti, Goldran’s wife’s housemate, declared that Goldran went often to the house “in search of his wife, sleeping with her some nights, I mean, every night, and taking the money that she gained from prostitution.” Adelia mentioned in passing that she knew Goldran since his time in Buenos Aires, when he lived with another woman.¹³

Francatti’s statement appears to have been cautiously prepared to combine with the accusation of the authorities, as is shown by the rectification in respect to the nights in which the accused slept with the victim, so as not to leave any doubts as to the connection of Goldran and his victim. But the central point of her statement is the reference to her previous familiarity with the accused in Buenos Aires, from where both of them came. The reference to the

Argentinean capital sounds threatening to the police because it indicates that the city was part of the common experiences of life, work and sociability of the men and women who lived in the world of prostitution in São Paulo. Unknown by the Brazilian police authorities, these people appeared to know each other very well before they arrived in the country. In many expulsion procedures such as this, Buenos Aires is concretised as an unknown past, and for this it becomes an important element in the definition of the identities of these unknown foreigners.

In the eyes of the authorities, and in agreement with the accusatory procedure that does not search for an offence, but a condemnable behaviour, the past becomes a central part of the identity of the undesirable. In this context, the past life in the police reports becomes almost a destiny, a condemnation. Nonetheless, the same references indicate that for the Argentinean Adelia Francatti and for many other women, the previous experience in Buenos Aires could acquire specific meanings.

If many processes were summary and revealed the trajectory of the authorities, such as in the case of Burckner, many others counted on the declarations of the supposed victims of the pimps, as in the case of Goldran. In these cases, the women called to incriminate the “undesirable” in question almost always referred to themselves as having a past in Buenos Aires. As such, in 1913, the French woman Fernanda Alban, 26 years old, appeared at a Rio police station in search of police protection against her thirty-year old Argentinean husband, Maurice, recently arrived from the Argentinean capital. To prove that her husband was dangerous, Fernanda brought to the police station various threatening letters that her husband had sent her and also receipts of the remittances of money sent to him while he was in Buenos Aires.

The story told by Fernanda had various novelistic moments, but it was not just a story of trafficking in women. According to her, the marriage was recent, having occurred in Paris one year earlier. Very soon afterwards, the couple left for Buenos Aires, but after a few months, Fernanda Alban escaped from her husband, who, in her words, “wanted to force her into prostitution”, and ended up in a boarding house of prostitutes in Rio de Janeiro.¹⁴ Barely arrived in Rio, Alban began to receive the threatening letters from her husband, and eventually, his unexpected visit, that ended up leading her to the police station.

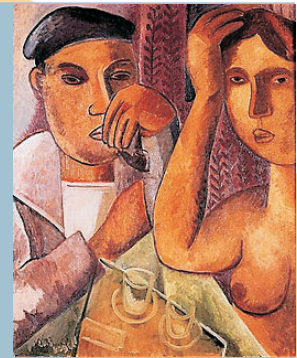
Buenos Aires represents in this and in other statements an experience of exploitation by a husband or a violent companion. The arrival in Brazil is accompanied by the hope for a more autonomous life. Fernanda, for example, established herself in a women’s boarding house in the elegant neighbourhood of Catete, close to the centre of the city. In the boarding house, she encountered at least one French woman who she had known for a long time. There is no evidence that Fernanda wanted to free herself from the practice of prostitution, as she did from the exploitation of her abusive husband.

Stories such as this bring to light some differences in the legal context and social organisation of sexual commerce in each city. In many Argentinean cities, prostitution was regulated by municipal ordinances since the 1870s. As in many other countries that followed the so-called “French system”, the municipality of Buenos Aires created a differentiated legal status for notorious prostitutes, defining rules for their circulation in public space as well as for working hours and other conditions of life and housing.

Maybe this French woman was not aware that her declarations corroborated the images that circulated with more and more force about Buenos Aires in various international ambits. Being a city that continued to regulate prostitution despite the growing international pressure for the abolishment of regulation measures, and to receive great contingents of European immigrants, the idea that the Argentinean capital was a paradise for white slavery was consistent with the report of Fernanda about her personal history. In Buenos Aires, she appeared to be incapable of fleeing the exploitation of her partner; in Rio de Janeiro, where prostitution was not regulated, she could seek a more autonomous life, re-establish relations with people she knew.

Therefore, in the new context she could count on some type of help from fellow countrymen as well as, principally, appeal to the police for protection against the persecution of her husband.

Stories such as this bring to light some differences in the legal context and social organisation of sexual commerce in each city. In many Argentinean cities, prostitution was regulated by municipal ordinances since the 1870s. As in many other countries that followed the so-called “French system”, the municipality of Buenos Aires created a differentiated legal status for notorious prostitutes, defining rules for their circulation in public space as well as for working hours and other conditions of life and housing.¹⁵ Differently, in Brazil, while the debate between the so-called “regulators” and “abolitionists” was brought up for discussion now and then, there was never a consensus for the approval of regulatory measures, considered authoritarian and immoral, since the regulatory intervention of the public power would legitimise the exploitation of sexual commerce by third parties. This difference reflected two specific legal traditions in relation to prostitution: In Argentina, sexual exploitation was only an offence in the “corruption of minors”. In Brazil, the exploitation of the prostitution of any woman was considered an offence in the penal code.



Sailor and a Prostitute

In both cases, the legislation was always directed to defend what was perceived as the common good or public morality, never the rights of the prostitutes, which were never in question. But the cases discussed here show that at least in the Brazilian case, many women could mobilise these legal notions in their favour. Concretely, in 1913 the Argentinean regulatory legislation did not protect Fernanda and the benefits gained by her in prostitution from her husband, since she was an adult and legally married. Therefore, she was fully responsible for her acts and her work as prostitute. In Rio de Janeiro, however, the threatening letters of her husband together with the frequent remittances of money to him were considered proof of pimping in the eyes of the Brazilian police. Such elements justified either the initiation of a case of pimping, in the terms of the Brazilian penal code or, of expulsion, under the terms of the 1907 law.

Reports of women like Fernanda suggest, even in the coercive and potentially manipulated context of a police investigation mounted to expel a foreigner, the expectation that life in Brazil could signify more autonomy in relation to previous entailments. This is expressed with particular clarity in the case of the 23 year old Russian Sara Praigret, resident of an elegant women’s boarding house at Lapa beach in Rio. Sara appears to have gone spontaneously to the police station in search of protection against her ex-partner, the young Italian, Vicente Grassi, 21 years old. At the station, Sara affirmed that she met him “when she was in Buenos Aires”. On her return to Rio, she was surprised by the uninvited appearance of Vicente, with intentions of living with her. The unexpected presence of Vicente ended up becoming a problem for Sara, if we take into account her affirmations that she gave him money, bought him clothes and ended up selling her jewellery to pay the expenses of this bothersome

man.

With an exceptional sincerity, Sara reported to the police precinct chief her decision thus—

... tired of maintaining Vicente, she was able to make him leave for Buenos Aires, at the end of December; for this end, she was obliged to borrow money from the renter of the building in which she resided, Ana Gold, to whom... she pawned a ring... after the departure of Vicente, she sent him a letter telling him to never return since she did not want to live in his company anymore....¹⁶

The whole case began at the exact point in time when Vicente, not accepting Sara's letter, decided to return to Rio in search of his wife. The police precinct chief acted rapidly, and was able to bring together statements from other women sympathetic to Sara. All of them told the same story, with a few different details that confirmed how bothersome was Vicente's showing up at his partner's door. Ana Gold, the owner of the boarding house mentioned that she gave Sara 10,000 réis for Vicente so that he could sleep in a hotel and leave her in peace. Another Russian woman, Margarida Grin, said she heard Vicente argue with Sara to give him 30,000 réis, with the justification that he was accustomed to always have some money on him.

In a story similar to that of Fernanda, Sara also was able to leave her life in Buenos Aires behind her, adapting to her new life in Rio thanks to her ties with other women, who helped her find an elegant boarding house to live and work. Moreover, her friends and acquaintances in Rio de Janeiro lent her money to "dispatch" Vicente to Buenos Aires. When this strategy did not work, Sara ended up appealing to the Rio police, who saw in her story the opportunity to free themselves of one more "undesirable". Thanks to the police intervention in the case, Sara saw Vicente being expelled from Brazil after only ten days since her first denunciation at the police station.

Fragments of the lives of such women show the partiality of the perceptions of contemporaries and also of the historiography that exclusively takes into account the victimisation and violence to which so many European prostitutes were submitted to in this period. Stories such as those of Sara, Fernanda and many other women do not corroborate this perspective insofar as they indicate that in certain moments of their lives, they could count on a variety of resources that increased their margins of action.

This is not to counterpoise autonomy and possibilities to that of the perspective of the victimised. However, fragmentary and incomplete reports from the experiences of work and sociability of many prostitutes allow us to call into question some of the basic lines of the histories of trafficking in women in this period. These histories, with strong and efficient symbolic dimensions (which not by chance have been updated throughout the twentieth century, and continue until today, with some significant changes in their national and racial as well as gender components) tend to restrict complex migratory experiences related to sexual commerce to a dimension marked only by coercion and violence. In this respect, the narratives of the trafficking of women tend to erase some of the central aspects of the experiences of many prostitutes, such as the centrality of relations of sociability and solidarity between women of the same origin in the decision to travel, the possibility of economic accumulation and the liberating dimension of certain transnational dislocations.

Many of the trajectories of life registered in the declarations given to the police reveal encounters of people, interests and histories that contribute to the consolidation of certain characterisations of these cities that were, at the same time, the scenario and part of the life experience of a variety of men and women. The exercise of mutually crossing these trajectories in South American cities and their possible meanings to the protagonists, with daily practices of social control and of repression of certain profiles of foreigners on the part of public functionaries, opens up the possibility to contextualise these practices of vigilance and control

and of seeing, in the middle of these practices, some indications of action and influences exercised by men and women.

The references by Rio's authorities to the Argentinean antecedents in the life of pimps and prostitutes began to function as an efficacious accusatory element, in part, because these references had peculiar meanings in the experiences of these women and men. As such, to spend time in Buenos Aires, or spend time in Rio de Janeiro, could be understood by public authorities as proof that they were facing threatening and unknown undesirables. At the same time, for many women, to spend time in Buenos Aires or Rio involved the possibility of re-encountering acquaintances, dealing with their income in a more autonomous form, escaping from harassing husbands, or simply taking a chance for a better life, just as many other immigrants.

- 1 In addition to the ample bibliography in the field of migratory studies, see, among others, Sheldon Leslie Maram, *Anarquistas, imigrantes e o movimento operário brasileiro, 1890-1920*, Paz e Terra, Rio de Janeiro, 1979; the works of Carlo Romani, *Oreste Ristori: uma aventura anarquista*, Annablume/Fapesp, São Paulo, 2002, Edilene Toledo, *Travessias revolucionárias: idéias e militantes sindicalistas em São Paulo e na Itália (1890-1945)*, Editora da Unicamp, Campinas, 1994, and of Vitor Wagner Neto de Oliveira, *Nas águas do Prata: os trabalhadores da rota fluvial entre Buenos Aires e Corumbá (1910-1930)*, Editora da Unicamp, Campinas, 2009.
- 2 See, for example, the works of Margareth Rago, *Os Prazeres da noite*, Paz e Terra, São Paulo, 1991; Lená Medeiros de Menezes, *Os Estrangeiros e o comércio do prazer nas ruas do Rio (1890-1930)* Arquivo Nacional, Rio de Janeiro, 1992; Donna Guy, *El Sexo peligroso: la prostitución legal en Buenos Aires, 1875-1955*, Sudamericana, Buenos Aires, 1994; and Yvette Trochon, *Las rutas de Eros. La trata de blancas en el Atlántico Sur*, Taurus, Montevideo, 2007.
- 3 A good example is the work of Rogério Luis Giampetro Bonfá who reviews and criticises the more traditional historiography which interprets the expulsion of foreigners as a symptom of the repression and authoritarianism of the First Republic, and also proposes an approach that contrasts the Brazilian and Argentinean cases. See his "Com lei ou sem lei: as expulsões de estrangeiros e o conflito entre o executivo e o judiciário na Primeira República", Unpublished Master's Dissertation, Universidade Estadual de Campinas, 2008.
- 4 The Argentinean law, called the "Resident" law, was approved in 1902. See Juan Suriano, *Trabajadores, Anarquismo y Estado Represor: de la ley de Residencia a la ley de Defensa Social (1902-1910)*, Centro Editor de América Latina, Buenos Aires, 1988; Eduardo Zimmermann, *Los liberales reformistas. La cuestión social en la Argentina*. Sudamericana/U. San Andrés, Buenos Aires, 1995; Susana Villavicencio (ed.), *Los contornos de la ciudadanía. Nacionales y extranjeros en la Argentina del Centenario*, Eudeba, Buenos Aires, 2003. The Brazilian law, known as the Gordo law after the deputy that presented it to the National Congress, was passed in 1907. See Lená Medeiros de Menezes, *Os Indesejáveis*, EdUERJ, Rio de Janeiro, 1996, pp. 183-187.
- 5 For a contemporary analysis of the legislation of expulsion in other Latin American countries, see J. Irizzary y Puente, "Exclusion and expulsion of aliens in Latin America", *The American Journal of International Law*, 36, 2, April 1942, pp. 252-270.
- 6 Transcribed in Lená Medeiros de Menezes, *Os Indesejáveis*, p. 207.
- 7 See Marcela Aspell de Yanzi Ferreira, "Expulsión de extranjeros. La ley 4144 'de residencia' y la jurisprudencia de la Suprema Corte de Justicia de la Nación", *Revista de Historia del*

Derecho, 15, 1987, and Lená Medeiros de Menezes, *Os Indesejáveis*, Rio de Janeiro: EdUERJ, 1996, pp. 187-202.

- 8 Rogério Bonfá discusses this perception, that first appears among contemporary critics of the law, and ends up being assumed by historians who interpret the First Republic as a “regime of legal exception”, an expression of Paulo Sérgio Pinheiro in *Estratégias da ilusão: a revolução mundial e o Brasil, 1922-1935*, Companhia das Letras, São Paulo, 1995. See Rogério Bonfá, *Com lei ou sem lei*, pp. 85-88.
- 9 Historian Lená Medeiros de Menezes affirms, based on a sample of 194 expulsion processes referring to pimping: “Taking into account the global conjuncture, there is a significant weight that marks the presence of pimps from Russia, Poland and France, which demonstrates that Rio de Janeiro was profoundly involved in the traffic organised at the international level, a fact that is proved by the total inversion of the weight of these nationalities in the general tendencies of immigration to Rio de Janeiro.” Menezes, *Os Indesejáveis*, p.163. See also Menezes, *Os Estrangeiros*, p. 80.
- 10 Expulsion of Mario Marck Burckner, IJJ 7 – 143, 1907. National Archive, Rio de Janeiro. (Hereafter, AN).
- 11 Expulsion of Mauricio Goldran, IJJ 7 – 144, 1912. AN.
- 12 I discuss this practice, as well as the preoccupation of the Brazilian authorities in promoting deportations to Europe, and not to Buenos Aires or Montevideo, in *Que Tenhas Teu Corpo: uma história social da prostituição no Rio de Janeiro*, Arquivo Nacional, Rio de Janeiro, 2006, p. 142. For the Argentinean case, Yanzi Ferreira identifies the same subterfuge among the expelled in the first years of the vigilance of the Resident law. See Ferreira, “Expulsión de extranjeros”, pp. 11-12.
- 13 Fourth testimony, Expulsion of Mauricio Goldran, IJJ 7 – 144, 1912. AN.
- 14 Testimony of Fernanda Alban, Expulsion of Maurice Alban, IJJ7 – 145, 1913. AN.
- 15 The “French system” was the style of the regulation of prostitution inherited from Napoleonic laws. Despite a series of revisions, it persisted throughout the nineteenth century and was adopted in different countries. See Alain Corbin, *Women for hire: prostitution and sexuality in France after 1850*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England, 1990. I have discussed the legal status of prostitutes in Buenos Aires and Rio de Janeiro contexts in “Esclavitud en blanco y negro: elementos para una historia del trabajo sexual femenino en Buenos Aires y en Río de Janeiro a fines del siglo XIX”, *Entrepasados*, 29, pp. 43-62.
- 16 Testimony of Sara Praigret, Expulsion of Vicente Grassi, IJJ-140, 1913, AN.

Picture Source:

1. <http://imagesvisions.blogspot.com/2009/07/augusto-malta-retratou-as-polacas-que.html>
2. [Http://veja.abril.com.br/vejarj/180505/capa.html](http://veja.abril.com.br/vejarj/180505/capa.html)