

They Changed My Life,
Ma'ariv newspaper, Nov 3 1995.

1. The red balls

This might my earliest recollection. I was lying down (I must have been one or two years old), and through the bars of my cot I saw a pair of hands holding two red balls which turned into four, then into eight, then reflected as sixteen and then became one again. This was magic; the fingers were my father's, who was practicing in front of the mirror before his performance that night, to watch himself and the effect of his trick. On one side, there was the mirror with his reflection and the red balls, and on the other side he himself, concrete, a man I met only few times in my life. My addiction to the games of snooker and billiard may perhaps be rooted in this distant recollection.

2. The first film in my life

The first time I went to the cinema I was ten years old. The film was "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs." It's true, the smallest dwarf, the clumsy one, the one that was always late behind the other dwarfs – touched me; but the film itself, apart from the magic of cinema that I encountered there for the first time, was far too sweet to appeal to my personality and to what was going on in my life at the time. But the first encounter with cinema continued through Pinocchio. A great film. There was the good old man, Geppeto, in whom I saw my grandfather who had then adopted me. And there was Pinocchio whose nose would grow to unimaginable dimensions whenever he lied. Lying was for me a vital way of surviving. Up to this day, when I watch the tape on television with my granddaughters Nadia and Alma, and we reach the part where Pinocchio lies – and his nose starts to grow – I am not sure what is lie and what is truth. I feel a bit uncomfortable in the nose area. I try to hide it from Nadia and Alma.

3. A statue in Sao Paulo

Since my early youth, I always believed that culture is to be found on the streets, on street corners. The number of museums and libraries in Sao Paulo had not grown throughout the 1940s. One early morning, with a thin tropical drizzle outside – I can't remember where I had spent the night – I suddenly came across the life-size statue of a woman, made of bronze, naked, charming and attractive. She was embraced by a man sleeping next to her. He had spent the night with her, hugging her tightly. He looked like any other man. Probably with no money for food and, for sure, without enough money to pay a prostitute.

4. The Carnival

The carnival was almost everything. Not the one on the radio – and later the television – I mean, with the music, the dancing. No, not that. The important thing was to watch the costumes, the wide variety of costumes made by the poor people, so rich in imagination. The ugly became beautiful, the pauper turned into a king, the fat became thin. But above all – and these were indeed many – the heads that were dressed up in cages – captured souls.

5. The Volcanic Period

I learned to read very late. But books did follow. That was my volcanic period – all of Dostoyevsky (it was translated then into Portuguese) and Shakespeare – from “Hamlet” to “The Tempest.” I used to read throughout the quiet of the night and in the morning I sneaked outside so my grandfather would think: “The boy is going to high-school.” But still, he was suspicious of this grandson who had the light on all night. What for? Reading brought an electrifying vibration through my body. It was as if the books were “reading me” and not I that was reading them. Then came the next volcano – A small record club opened in my neighborhood. Entrance was free. Only classical music, on headphones. And so began the turn of Beethoven's nine symphonies (that was all they could offer of Beethoven). I listened to them from beginning to end, endlessly, and when the turn of the ninth came – I filled with tears. It was there that I found the answer to pain and suffering – the answer to oppression, insult, madness, poverty and downfall. Also to hope

and optimism, which we all needed – the Brazilian people and me as one of them. And the last volcano – Vincent Van Gogh. The Brazilian media mogul, Assis de Chateaubriand, decided to dedicate an entire floor in the huge building of his newspaper to an art museum, especially modern art (with free entrance). And the talented architect, Leena Bo, hung one of the most beautiful works of art in his collection – a Van Gogh painting – opposite the elevator doors on the third floor. So, when the doors of the elevator opened, the painting would appear, in a special framing and all the clerks and journalists working in the upper floors of the building could watch the painting of this genius, even if for a few seconds. A year later I went to Buenos Aires and on the way back – by ship – I brought with me the book of Van Gogh's letters, which you couldn't get in Portuguese, only in Spanish. At customs they demanded I pay for it. I didn't have any money and apparently, I insulted someone there for this strange request for money. Not a second passed and two giants held me up in the air and threw me out into the sun and the scalding hot asphalt outside the customs. They threw behind the book I had longed for so much, which I own to this day, damaged because of the fall. A few years later, Andre Schwartz-Bardt told me that when he left Paris for a few years, to write "The Last of the Just", he took with him only one book (Van Gogh's letters) to be his guide to "artistic behavior".

6. The Carnival again

In the Sao Paulo Carnival, certain ethnic groups found city squares to dance their own dances, non-Brazilian dances. One of these groups was the Syrian-Lebanese community. For the first time I saw the traditional Debka dance, monotonous but very impressive. Their community was a large one and leading this human rhythmic body was a man with a scarf in his hand. We know this dance well over here. The newborn state of Israel used to send guides to the Zionist youth movements in Brazil to teach dances, among them the Debka. But also other folk dances like "El Ginat Egoz" and "Shaavtem mayim". I had never seen anything more ridiculous - everybody dancing as if they were ballerinas in a ballet school in Vienna. That was it for me. I was glad years later, to come across Dan Ben-Amotz's article in the "Maariv"

newspaper, where he commented about the lack of authenticity of these dances at the “Dalia Festival” – the folk dancing haven of the time.

7. Battleship Potemkin

When I first came to Israel I joined Kibbutz Bror Hayil, which had a Portuguese-speaking community. The members came up to me and suggested – what do you think about presenting a movie each week, a good movie! They saw me as the “expert from Paris.” I took up this offer with excitement. I planned the first movie I would present – “Battleship Potemkin.” In this socialist community, a place whose ideals were against oppression and injustice, it was right to present the greatest movie in film history – Eisenstein’s film, with the death of the sailor Vakolinchuk and the massacre of the people by the Tzar’s army on the steps of Odessa. The kibbutz had a very large dining room. That night the dining room didn’t have a single seat free. I spoke in Portuguese, because I still didn’t know Hebrew then and the screening of the masterpiece began. I was concentrated on the film and didn’t notice what was going on: in the middle of the screening. Slowly, the entire audience had left the hall. They did it very quietly, out of respect for me and maybe not to offend the expert from Paris. The dining room was empty. I thought to myself, I made a mistake, maybe I should have screened Griffith’s “Birth of a Nation”. Not because of its content, but because of its name.

8. Old Aunt China

One Morning Hayim Hefer asked me if he could screen my film *Old Aunt China* at the Hammam club, in Jaffa, that night. I told him I doubted whether the film would suit the place: Neither Jacques Prevert, who wrote me the prologue, nor Germaine Tailleferre who composed the music, nor even Jean-Pierre Rampal, playing the flute, suited the atmosphere of the Hammam. But Hayim insisted – “We want the Hammam to be also a cultural club, and that includes good movies”.

At night, during the screening, there was shouting and booing. Dan Ben-Amotz, the moderator of the event, was furious. Yigael Tumarkin got furious too. Nehama Hendel, the singer, shouted “But Dan, you can’t make the audience watch what they don’t want to!” Ben-Amotz replied, “Whoever wants

to leave can have their tickets refunded". Not many did because the lights went on, and people didn't want to be identified with anti-culture.

The screening began again. When the film ended, Shoshana Damari went on stage and opened with these words, - "Well, after 'all that art' I'll sing *Kalaniyot* "(Anemones). She, of course, couldn't guess that I was a great admirer of hers and of that song. For me, Shoshana Damari was the Israeli Yma Sumac, the great South American Singer.

I walked all the way back home from Jaffa to Tel Aviv, feeling like those who, having faced alone a hostile audience, come out of it reinforced.