

Os melhores anos de nossas vidas / The Best Years of Our Lives. Stories of Exile Deep in Brazil

Directed by: Andrea Pasquini

Edited by: André Finotti

Country: Brazil

Language: Portuguese (English subtitles)

Running time: 65'

Date: 2003

Availability in the UK: Queen Mary, University of London, Library

This documentary is a series of interviews with the patients of a leprosy hospital in Brazil. Interviewees are men and women of all ages – except children – affected by Hansen's disease. They tell the long and tortuous history of the ward from the early 1940s to the present, from their own points of view. Only the perspective of the patients is included, as there are no interviews with doctors, nurses, wardens or administrative staff.

The film starts with images showing the location of the hospital, in a swampy area of the countryside isolated from the rest of society, while the patients' voice-overs tell how, decades ago, they were first taken there and forced to stay for life. As soon as they were hospitalised, they were subjected to a very strict confinement and immediately became aware that once there, they could never leave. Most of them compare their past experiences there with imprisonment, surrounded by barbed-wire fences and guards. They had very limited visits from relatives and were kept at a physical distance from them; they could barely hold hands. These conditions of confinement, together with the consequences of the disease itself – the loss of skin and nerve sensitivity and constant infections leading to amputations – and the lack of a cure in those days, made both their actual living and life prospects an endless misery. Many inmates became insane and were separated from the others; some committed suicide out of desperation. As treatments were so inhumane, they report eventually taking up arms against the wardens, but they didn't hurt anyone because their 'torturers' – as they used to call them – remained at a distance.

However, over the years the conditions of the hospital colony changed dramatically and now they have facilities for a more enjoyable life: an enormous cinema, music and dancing rooms, a casino, a bar, a pergola, a library, a reservoir, etc. The sick all work to keep the place clean and maintained. Some of them have married other patients and had their weddings at the hospital. Nowadays they are free to leave, but many of them remain there because they seem to be very attached to a place that is theirs and that represents their lived history. There is also a cemetery where they are buried when they die. It is also difficult to start a life outside the hospital because of social and work discrimination. Others don't have the economic means to live by themselves. Some of the interviewees feel that now the hospice is 'a wonderful place': it is their 'home'.

After the film finishes, some facts are presented, telling the audience that: a) Brazil is second to India in the number of Hansen's disease (leprosy) cases; b) segregation as an attempt to eradicate the disease completely failed; c) leprosy can now be cured through public health treatments, which are free, and has a very low contagion rate.

Characters are presented on location. Some of them are interviewed in an old hospice for sufferers of leprosy and some others at home

Annotated by Guillermo Olivera

Postdoctoral Research Assistant, 2005-06

AHRC Project [*Brazilian and Argentine Documentary Film-Making*](#)

Project Director: Else R P Vieira

Department of Hispanic Studies, Queen Mary, University of London

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