

“Me too” I am still here and I remember

I understand why the film *Ainda Estou Aqui* is making such an impact on thousands of Portuguese to sold out audiences in the cinemas. I know it reminds them of the Salazar era in their bones and in their souls.

By Dennis Redmont

The movie *Ainda Estou Aqui*, which is playing to sold out box offices here in Portugal made me reflect on my days in Rio de Janeiro under the dictatorship. I told myself: “Eu também ainda estou aqui e lembro-me.”

I was part of the “imprensa gringa” in 1970-76 covering the Brazilian military government, the torture, the disappearances, the kidnapping of ambassadors and the middle class families caught in the middle of their happy beach side existence and the dark, dirty cells of the military police.

I met with those families who had members among the tens of thousands of victims and shared their agony and wrote about their plight. I lived in the Zona Sul Rio as a foreign correspondent for the Associated Press. It was a much admired post for its “Dolce Vita” life style that reflected Rio for its beautiful scenery, carnival and sunshine. But it was a debilitating one for a journalist who had to live through the tragedies that the dictatorship imposed on human lives.

I was responsible for sending news and photos abroad for the Associated Press while the local media was muzzled by the censorship.

And we paid for our temerity.

I understand why the film *Ainda Estou Aqui* is making such an impact on thousands of Portuguese to sold out audiences in the cinemas. I know it reminds them of the Salazar era in their bones and in their souls.

It reminds them of Peniche, Aljube, Tarrafal and many other places where Portuguese opposition were interrogated and brutally tortured.

The Brazilian actress Fernanda Torres, who sometimes lives in Lisbon, won the prestigious U.S. award Golden Globe and the nomination for an Oscar for best actress.

The film takes an intimate look at Brazil under the military dictatorship that held the country in its grip until 1985. Under that regime, political dissidents and those suspected of helping clandestine opponents of the regime were questioned, tortured, exiled and killed for their opposition.

Rubens Paiva, a former Brazilian congressman, who left politics after he was exiled from Rio, was among the thousands who were tortured and the hundreds who went missing and killed.

One day, the military dressed in civilian clothes rang the bell at his family house and asked Paiva to come for questioning. After Paiva walked out of his front door, the family never saw him again.

Eunice Paiva, his wife, was also detained for 12 days, and is the heroin of the film based on the book written by their son Marcelo Rubens Paiva.

The place of questioning for Paiva was in the north zone of Rio, at Barão de Mesquita, a place vaguely reminiscent of the Pide headquarters on Rua António Maria Cardoso, in Lisbon.

This is how the clandestine rebels worked to defeat the military by breaking censorship in Rio.

Like in Portugal, where I lived in late 1960s before moving to Rio, no local news media was permitted to speak about the clandestine struggle. But the foreign media played a major role. The Brazilian clandestine organization named “VPR-Vanguardia Popular Revolucionária” needed publicity.

They would be kidnapping ambassadors. The first victims was the US ambassador, followed by the German and then the Swiss ambassador during my stay in Rio.

The film is situated exactly at that period and profiles the kidnapping of the Swiss ambassador.

The VPR or other groups would leave their demands in an envelope usually in a trash can, and we would be alerted by an anonymous phone call to pick it up from the bin.

The demands were to publish a communique on the front pages of the national newspapers, criticizing the government and asking for the release of their comrades in prison. The communique would list the name of the prisoners that they demanded to be exchanged for the abducted diplomats.

These negotiations would proceed for weeks through the media: the government would respond with an official communique.

The foreign journalists who published the account of the clandestine groups and gave voice to their demands in the dispatches sent abroad were often arrested or detained or expelled, like my colleague from the Agence France Press. They would be taken to the airport directly and pushed onto a flight to assure their departure out of the country after spending some days in jail.

In *Ainda Estou Aqui*, the story evolves around the kidnapped Swiss ambassador who was released after 40 days captivity at the start of 1971. When I interviewed kidnapped Swiss Ambassador Giovanni Bucher he told me he was blindfolded throughout his abduction, never knew where he was and he was sure he would never see the daylight ever again. "I want to go home" he told me after he was found in the middle of the night dazed on a deserted Rio street. He left shortly afterwards.

These were the daily life stories of Rio those days. We slept in our sleeping bags in our offices waiting for new messages to be dropped in our trash bins or for official communiqués about eventual release of the prisoners to be flown either to Cuba or Chile or Mexico or Algiers.

We walked on a tight rope when covering anything about the regime. My staffer in São Paulo who happened to be a pro-dissident activist had her husband disappear for weeks. We had to be accurate and also be attentive not to be misled by government agents who would pose as journalists to put us in trouble. We were even suspicious of each other in case there were official informants among us in our offices.

In the case of Bucher, he was worth 70 prisoners, flown to Chile (where Allende was in power before General Pinochet toppled him with a coup).

To the shame of the Brazilian regime, the kidnapped diplomats would only be released when the freed prisoners landed safely in the foreign countries and their photos had been delivered and published in the international and also local Brazilian media as a proof for the safe exit from Brazil.

Cases like the Rubens Paiva case was difficult to cover because families were reluctant to speak fearing further repercussion but his wife Eunice had no fear. We would attend her gatherings at discreet places like her friends' houses.

Her case was similar to another tragedy that caught the attention of the world media at the same time when the son of an internationally renowned fashion designer Zuzu Angel disappeared. Her son's body was never found.

For those who want a sequel to *Ainda Estou Aqui*, a 2006 movie named *Zuzu Angel* is a good watch.

Zuzu found out that her son Stuart, who was also carrying a US citizenship, was dragged behind a jeep with his mouth glued to the exhaust pipe and hemorrhaged to death in jail, according to witnesses.

There was no limit to torture techniques as recounted by survivors later.

Stuart's fiancée, Sônia, another opponent to the regime, also died in the hands of the political police.

Zuzu used international connections by sneaking into a Rio Hotel and confronting the then US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger who ignored her case as Brazilian-US relations were too important to be spoiled by human rights.

I was in New York during a short break when Zuzu showed up there. She had somehow defied the regime by putting on a fashion show at the Brazilian consulate in New York because of her international fame and she embroidered little angels on the fabrics in memory of her son to the dismay of the Brazilian authorities. "I will keep reminding my son's ordeal and will never give up," she told me after

the catwalk [desfile]. Zuzu died in a suspicious car accident that took her life in a Rio tunnel in 1976. Her family believes she was killed by the military police.

After more than 50 years, the memories remain vivid. They are harsh for those who covered it and even more for the families and the people who lived under dictatorships. Movies like *Ainda Estou Aqui* pay a tribute to those who suffered.