

# Luis S. Krausz

## The Clocks

*from Memories in Ruins*

THERE WAS NO OTHER NEIGHBORHOOD IN SÃO PAULO MORE PROPITIOUS to cultivating Austro-Hungarian obsessions than Sumaré—obsessions that, frustrated *over there*, had found fertile soil *over here*, and could develop freely. *Drüben*—on the other side—there had been a correct order for everything: a framework that shaped our souls and allowed us to put everything in its assigned place, according to a hierarchy sanctified over time, and which we held in the same regard as the ten Sephirot of the Kabbalistic tree. It was an order we clung to as we might the very tree of life, and that showed us the true value of all things. Thanks to this order we—unlike the nameless poor of undefined race—were not colonized, nor were we akin to those displaced Jews who turned up like beggars on the doorsteps of unknown lands. We wanted to believe this would make us Europeans: Europeans in places of exile, like Sumaré, where we dreamt of founding our colony of expats—a colony that would be a real *Gartensiedlung*: a neighborhood of gardens cultivated skillfully and efficiently; of impeccably organized libraries; of intact inheritances from grandparents and great grandparents; a neighborhood of stamp collectors and alchemists; of orchid lovers and men of letters; where the cool breezes and shady gardens would bring respite from all cares and relief from all pain—a world that was like a book itself, where we imagined we would not be swallowed by time and by history, by the hurricane that blows from Paradise, but where we would be safe: a vegetable patch and an orchard that neither the heat nor the despair that oppressed the city's streets could penetrate; our city of peace, the port of our happiness. There would be permanence and durability here, and we longed for the seasons to come, each in its turn: the heat of the dry season and the rain of the rainy season and the cold of the cold season.

Of all my family's Austro-Hungarian obsessions, none could rival that of the clocks, which exceeded all reasonable proportions, and became a serious enterprise—one whose secret goal was, perhaps, to master time itself. My mother had set aside a room exclusively for the clocks: striking clocks, wall and mantel clocks, wrist and pocket watches. All of these piled up in our house like the Egyptian plagues, procured from antique shops and markets in cities all over the world by acquaintances, who, before setting off on their travels, were invariably charged with this small kindness. This amassing of scattered hours had become comparable to a religious mission. Every day my father would spend hours

in that strange room, which clicked and resounded with the chords of many striking and musical clocks, but remained locked, inaccessible to all, for the rest of the day. He patiently wound those cruel instruments, which, nevertheless, announced the ever-closer arrival, not of the future, but of the implacable angel of death with its silken wings.

The room, whose entrance was by the foot of the stairs, had been outfitted with a set of double doors lined with cork in an attempt to contain the noise of the pitiless machinery that, nevertheless, spilled out into the house, into the garden, and even, in the small hours of the night, into the neighbors' houses, prompting fruitless complaints, while more and more clocks arrived, crowding the walls and the shelves, the drawers and the desks of what should have been our library, but whose books had long since been banished to make room for the infernal devices. Life without them had become impossible for my mother, and my father, resigned to his fate, wound the clocks—the wrist and pocket watches once a day, the mantel clocks every other day, the striking clocks once a week and thus forth, so that they should always be ready, tick-tocking in their march towards the end of time. He did this with unselfish, touching care, trailed all the while by my mother, who, a cloth in her clenched fist, busied herself removing the tiniest traces of dust. The beat of the pendulums and the soar of the bells would cause his face to contort in an expression of displeasure, which he nevertheless kept in check, so as not to hurt her. But the traces of those grimaces lingered, in the corners of his mouth, and he bore them for the rest of the day like an inescapable kismet. Once done, they would lock the room, carefully, and close the window that opened out onto the garden, and then my father would sigh, relieved of his burden until the following day.

Though we were seldom allowed to see it, we all held the secret collection in great esteem, and when we traveled, we never neglected our compulsory contribution to the enormous repository of lost hours. And sometimes, during dinner, we reminisced on visits paid to this or that antique shop, in this or that city, years and even decades earlier. The clocks were also diligently catalogued in a big, black book by my father, who used an old Parker Vacumatic fountain pen—his Bar Mitzvah present—to record each one in his illegible handwriting. The brand; the year and place of manufacture; the place, date, and price of acquisition—this was all recorded next to a five-digit catalogue number. My father often asked himself whether it would not be wise to switch to a six-digit cataloguing system, given that the collection's rate of growth showed no signs of slowing. The rest of us were of the opinion that there was no need to change the existing codes, that it would suffice simply to follow the natural order of the numbers, but he remained unconvinced by the supposed neutrality of the zeros to the left. He would have preferred a new, six-digit system, one that could account for every item in the collection equally. My father went so far as to order a German tome on cataloguing from the bookseller and antiquarian Stefan Geyerhahn, and once the book reached his hands he took to spending several hours a day, after lunch, shut away in that forbidden room, absorbed in the

thick volume with black covers, yellowing pages, and gothic writing published in Prussia in 1905, which bore the solemn title *Katalogisierungskunde* (*The Science of Cataloguing*). It was an indigestible treatise, divided into numbered chapters, subchapters, and paragraphs. A type of universal code of law, the strict obedience of which was fundamental to life in society: a sort of universal constitution—or a summa, in German, of the Talmudic treatises that guided Jews through millennia of diaspora—to which my father dedicated himself with religious zeal, to the point that he became immune to the racket of the clocks. I imagined him, behind the set of double, cork-lined doors, gesticulating with his hands and fingers, tunelessly singing the verses of that treatise, as our forefathers had done in Poland or on the riverbanks of Babylon.

The wisdom contained in that volume did not bring any visible change to the secret life of the clocks, but a new hierarchy now governed their relations: a hierarchy that only my father understood, legitimized by years of study. It was a strictly private etymology, which traced a tangle of links among the clocks—links like invisible spider webs hanging in the room, their strands stretching out in every direction, forcing my father to take careful steps as he walked, contorting himself and zigzagging around the room, bending forward and to either side, so as not to break the secret strands, the existence of which only he knew, and which became more and more tangled as he consulted further works written by cataloguing experts, delivered by booksellers and antiquarians, which consumed many of his hours, though he never succeeded in reaching a final conclusion as to how best to organize his collection.

What we didn't suspect was that, alongside his studies of *Katalogisierungskunde*, my father was also dedicating himself to experiments of another nature while locked up in that private room. He had long since buried the messianic ideas of our forefathers and, with them, the belief in progress. Instead, he was looking for a way backwards, and all those old clocks, whose hands had revolved around themselves for centuries, perhaps had something to teach him. He was especially interested in one ancient clock, a mantel one, which my great grandmother had received as a wedding gift in Preßburg, now Bratislava. It was a clock whose hands moved from left to right, that is, counterclockwise. Rather than numbers, the dial featured the first twelve letters of the Hebrew alphabet, drawn in black on a plain enameled background; it was said that if someone were to pass in front of it and observe the hands moving for long enough, a paradisiacal vision would be bestowed upon them. The rest of us had set aside that story long before, but my father was increasingly convinced that he was close to divining its significance.

All this activity was shrouded in the most impenetrable secrecy, and this parallel activity—to which my father never made the slightest reference—was carried out under the guise of cataloguing and dedication to the profane manual of the art of cataloguing. My father would emerge exhausted and red-eyed from those hours of work, increasingly tormented by doubt.

We never suspected that, with these experiments, he was hoping to draw nearer to things that had been forgotten *over there*, far away, during the time of the great change.

*—translated from the Portuguese by Ana Fletcher*