

Reminiscences of a Numismatic Bookseller 4

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Over the past three and a half decades I have traveled far and wide to acquire numismatic libraries. A story could be told about a number of these acquisitional forays but none, perhaps, is more exotic than the one that follows.

In the late 1990s, an advertisement regularly appearing in *The Numismatist* stated that “We are in constant need of important numismatic literature and are prepared to travel wherever the books are.” Although library buying trips by then had been made to several European countries, Canada, and a great many states across the U.S., this ad, and others like it, had never to my knowledge produced direct results. That changed in January 1999.

I received a telephone call from a coin dealer who had conducted business from Portugal in the third quarter of the twentieth century. He cited the ad and asked if I would be interested in purchasing his substantial numismatic library. Operating from Lisbon, although of Austrian origin, Thomas Faistauer was internationally well known for his numismatic specialties, namely the coins and medals of Portugal, Brazil, and Spanish America. His fine collection of colonial eight reales was sold at auction in 1976 by Jess Peters, and his Spanish American colonial coins were auctioned by Henry Christensen in 1979. Other portions of his collection were sold by Christensen in his 1983 Santa Cruz sale and as late as 2000 by Hess-Divo.

A trip to Portugal, a place I had never visited, was certainly appealing. Cambuquira? Yes, Mr. Faistauer confirmed, he and his wife now resided in Brazil, in a small town about a three-hour drive from São Paulo. The name of the *cidade* conjures an exotic location, if perhaps not as enticing as Coleridge’s mythical Xanadu, surely more than heady enough for a numismatic bookseller. Located in the second most populous state of Brazil, Minas Gerais, Cambuquira is surrounded by commercial agriculture and, as I found out, menacing giant ant hills dot the

region. The “General Mines” area was once famous for its rich deposits of gold and gems, later including diamonds. Gold was first discovered in 1693 and mining continued into the nineteenth century. Nowadays the region is the largest producer of coffee and milk in the country, the former readily apparent from the profusion of *Coffea* plants, laden with a bounty of red seeds called coffee beans, proliferating on Cambuquira’s verdant rolling hillsides.

Responding to Faistauer’s query in the affirmative, yes, I could visit him in late February, due to prior commitments. The Faistauers, however, were concerned that traveling in and out of São Paulo during Mardi Gras, which began in the middle of February that year, would not be safe and I rearranged my schedule to allow for a trip earlier in the month. A visa was required and a quick trip was made to the Brazilian consulate in Los Angeles to secure it. The twelve-hour flight to São Paulo was grueling if uneventful and, upon arrival, two Faistauer employees met me at the airport. A trip by automobile ensued. Throughout, miles of excellent highway were interrupted by miserable stretches of dirt or gravel, though road work had been supposedly been in process in these areas for years. Halfway to Cambuquira, we stopped for an early-afternoon meal at an excellent *churrascaria*. The driver and his companion were very alert and cautious upon arrival and departure, to which I paid scant notice at the time.

Eventually we arrived at the Faistauer residence in Cambuquira, inside a large compound of several acres enclosed by a ten-foot-high stone wall surmounted by glass shards and featuring an impenetrable steel gate that could be operated only from inside. Following a phone call, the electronic gate swung open and, for a stretch, we passed through various plantings till we arrived at a charming large old plantation house, built in the early 1800s. I was greeted warmly by the Faistauers and was shown to a spacious bedroom suite. After unpacking and resting a bit, Thomas Faistauer gave me a tour of the rooms in the house where his books were located, then we walked around outside. In addition to ornamental plantings, there were experimental sections where organic fruits and vegetables were being grown and pens for a variety of farm animals. As we ventured towards one of the perimeter walls, a number of dogs started growling and barking ferociously. The hounds, Faistauer explained, were loosed from their kennel in the evening and he cautioned me not to venture outside the house at night.

A retinue of employees were housed in facilities apart from the main house. Mrs. Faistauer advised me that their small community was virtually self-sufficient inside their walled enclave. Coffee in the morning was made from beans harvested and roasted there, bread was baked daily, meat, fruit, and vegetables were plentiful. A large-scale agricultural operation conducted by the Faistauers took place on land nearby and accounted for much of the produce sold in the town. The Faistauers were clearly in love with Cambuquira and their endeavors had a substantial and highly beneficial effect on the local economy.

I neglected to mention that when Mr. Faistauer was taking me through the house, he had taken me to the master bedroom suite and had shown me several holes and chips in the bathroom tile. Not a young man at the time at the time, he related to me how, less than a year before my visit, he had confronted, exchanged shots with, and killed two intruders in the house, one in their bathroom, another in the kitchen. It took several hours for the authorities to arrive and the Faistauers were convinced that the local *policia* were involved in the home invasion. Immediately thereafter, the perimeter walls were heightened an additional two feet and spiked with pieces of broken glass, and gate security was enhanced. The hacienda was an armed camp and everywhere we went during my visit, Mr. Faistauer was packing heat. Even at poolside one morning I noticed the butt of a handgun protruding from his robe. The caution previously exercised by my driver and his helper suddenly came into focus.

Although a charming village, the streets of Cambuquira became a bit less idyllic when I noticed soldiers with automatic weapons stationed on the corners of several of them. One day, on a visit to the charming grounds and mineral spa at São Lourenço, an hour or so away, the car broke down in a remote area and, while we waited for roadside assistance, the Faistauers were quite concerned about the possibility of being accosted. At the time, I never felt in danger. Now I wonder. The Faistauers may have been overly cautious, given their frightening experience, but surely I was far too oblivious to the dangers of being in Brazil at such a tumultuous time.

Part of the need for my early visit was attributable to the rapidly deteriorating value of the Brazilian real. On my second day there we quickly agreed on a price for the library and the books were packed. Over the years it typically has been difficult to send books from South

America to the United States, yet Faistauer somehow managed to ship the books quickly and cheaply. The first portion of the library was sold in my November 13, 1999, sale as “Consignment FF: An Important Numismatic Library”; the second part was also sold as “Consignment FF” in June of the following year. It was a fine library, far more varied in content than Faistauer’s numismatic specialties would suggest. That said, it featured many standard works on Portuguese, Brazilian, and Spanish-American numismatic topics, including classics by Medina, Sousa Lobo, Batalha Reis, Meili, Rosa, and Herrera. Between the two sales, over 700 lots were offered, many comprised of multiple publications. A goodly number of volumes were attractively bound in leather and condition was generally excellent, despite years spent in a warm, humid climate.

At the time, my son was majoring in biology and environmental studies at the University of California, Santa Cruz. He was also involved in an experimental farming program there. A large organic farming operation was conducted by the Faistauers and we talked about the possibility of George Albert spending a semester or two there. Unfortunately, the plans never reached fruition and he subsequently spent a year in Costa Rica.

My trip to Brazil is among the more memorable experiences in my life. Certainly I have never bought a numismatic library under more singular circumstances.