

Portrait of Gaddy Tauber: Organs Trafficker, Holocaust Survivor

By Nancy Scheper-Hughes

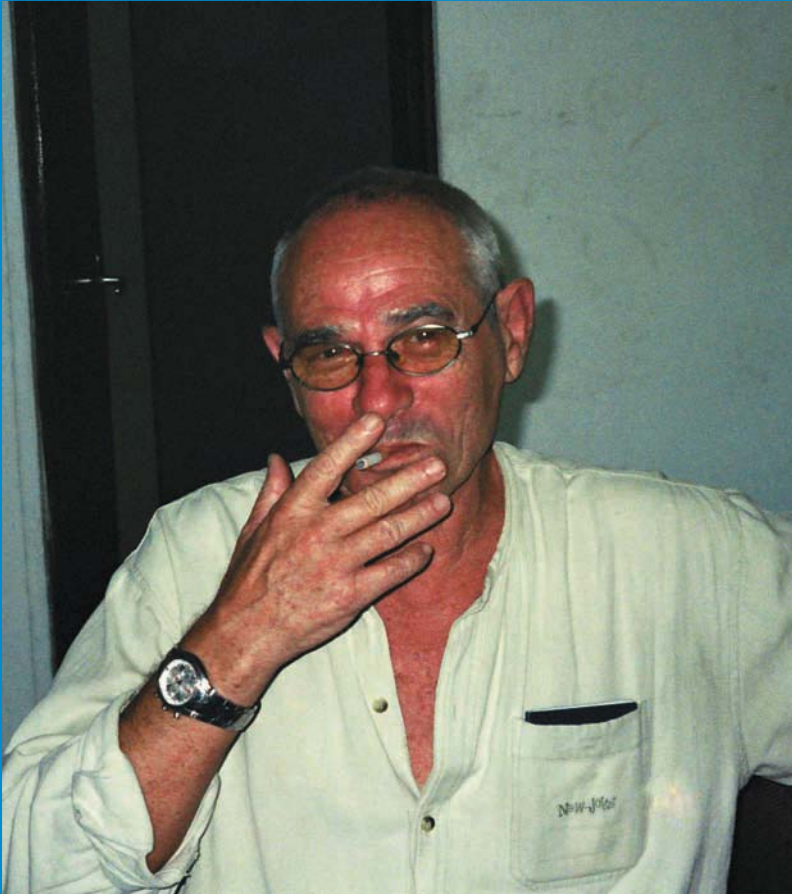


Photo by Nancy Scheper-Hughes.

Gaddy Tauber
relaxes in prison.

“I haven’t much to complain about.” Gadalya “Gaddy” Tauber did indeed look more fit and relaxed than he had during my first encounter with him at the Henrique Dias military police brigades in 2005. Then, he was still recovering from the shock of his conviction the previous year on charges of organized crime, racketeering, human trafficking and commerce in human organs and his subsequent imprisonment in Recife, Brazil.

On this visit, in July of 2006, I was accompanied by Brazilian journalist Julio Ludimir who, like me, was investigating the international organs trafficking ring that had operated out of Recife during 2002–03. Truly global in its scope, the multimillion dollar scheme originated in Israel and was active in several sites in Eastern Europe, Turkey, Brazil, South Africa and the United States. Ludimir and I were both fascinated by

Tauber, the hyper-intelligent, complex and wily 70-year-old former officer in the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) who was widely rumored in Brazil to be a spy, a drug trafficker, an arms dealer and a member of Mosad, Israel’s ultra-elite military force.

As we settled into a corner of the prison yard, Gaddy made a confession: “Last time I told you that I never killed a man. That was untrue. This time I will tell you the truth, all of it.” This was Gaddy as Scheherazade, luring visitors back for another installment in a story that seemed to have no end. At the start of every prison visit he would correct a detail from the previous meeting, and he would end with a promise: “Next time I’ll tell you about ‘the boss’ of the organs trafficking ring.” Or: “Next Sunday come again when Terezinha, my wife, is here [for a bi-monthly conjugal visit from Bom Pastor, the women’s prison].”

“I should have died 70 years ago,” Gaddy began. When he was three years old, his parents fled the Nazi invasion of Poland; they went to Russia, sending Gaddy to live with a Catholic peasant in the Ukraine who hid the little boy and several other Jewish children in his cellar.

Although Tauber was not mistreated, neither was he protected. When the German police arrived, the boy was handed over, but he was described as an orphan. “Luckily,” he said, “I was very fair and had Aryan features. I was brought to a camp for war-displaced children somewhere in the Ukraine where we were to be adopted by German families.” Nonetheless, Gaddy, who was five years old at the time, says he remembers hunger, sickness and many deaths in the camp. He eventually managed to escape and, after the war, was reunited with his parents.

In 1947 the family relocated to Israel where Tauber finished school and did his required military service. As a young man he showed proficiency in science and math but was never encouraged to continue his studies. He became a professional soldier, “the only job for which I was well suited.”

After retiring from the military, Tauber began traveling the world, selling his skills in police and security training. He met Captain Ivan Bonifacio da Silva, a retired Brazilian military police officer, in 1997 at a SWAT training class in Miami. They got along well, and da Silva invited Tauber to Brazil where they set up a consulting firm specializing in security training. They also tried to break into the legal weapons trade — selling arms to the military and police in Pernambuco — and were awarded an \$8.5 million contract by the governor, Miguel Arrais. But that deal collapsed when Arrais and his party lost the next election.

During this time Gaddy fell in love with Brazil and with Terezinha Medeiros, an attractive and sophisticated lawyer in her fifties. When the arms deal fell through, Gaddy had no way of making a living in Brazil and was forced to return to Israel. There, in 1999, he was approached by Ilan Perry, a businessman with a background in medical insurance who was involved in setting up a global transplant scheme. Perry offered Tauber a way to return to Recife as a local agent for his “company.” All Tauber had to do was to find someone in Recife who could recruit people willing to travel abroad and sell a kidney to Israeli transplant patients. “I refused outright,” Gaddy said. “I had no idea that such things were possible, and I found it distasteful.”

Three years later, in 2002, Tauber was approached again, this time by the wife of an old friend. Her description of the pressing need of Jewish transplant patients who were dying on dialysis machines while waiting for transplants caused Tauber to change his mind. Now he was prepared “to do something to save the world’s Jews, even if it meant finding kidneys for them in the slums of Brazil.”

This time Gaddy returned to Brazil on a mission. Once again he teamed up with da Silva, and in no time at all, a new criminal network had formed. It was a pyramid structure with Ilan Perry at the top, and everyone got a cut. Gaddy, who was in charge of financial operations in Recife, made \$10,000 on each successful transplant. Captain da Silva, who recruited donors though local “kidney hunters,” received \$5,000 for every kidney procured. Silvio Bourdoux, a military police doctor and colonel who handled medical screening and blood matching, was paid \$500 for every donor

screened. Captain da Silva’s wife was also involved; she traveled with the donors to South Africa where they were taken to a safe house to await their operation. A parallel structure existed in both Durban and Johannesburg.

Gaddy received the money needed to organize the trips directly from Perry and deposited it under the name of his Brazilian wife, Terezinha, who served as the “accountant” for the scheme. Together, Gaddy and his team rounded up more than 50 donors to send to South Africa where 38 of them were relieved of a “spare” kidney.

The *meninos* (or “boys” as the kidney sellers were called) were easy prey. As soon as the first two or three returned safely from Durban and began flashing wads of hundred dollar bills, the word was out, and the kidney hunters didn’t have to do anything but take down names — more than a hundred of them. The *meninos* had spent their lives in Recife’s rundown, working-class neighborhoods, in concrete slab houses whose roof tiles shook every few minutes as planes roared overhead. They wanted to travel, too, to see the world and to come back, their pockets bulging. It was a buyers’ market, and the price for a “fresh” kidney fell almost immediately from \$10,000 to \$6,000 and then down to \$3,000. Even so, there was no lack of enthusiasm among the unemployed and indebted.

When several transplants were derailed because the donors did not pass the Durban team’s medical screening, Perry urged Tauber to set up a transplant center in Recife. Flying Israeli patients to Brazil, where a steady supply of kidney donors was close at hand, would be more convenient and less expensive than flying both patients and donors to South Africa.

It was a risky business, but da Silva assured Gaddy they could get away with it. Brazilian laws against organ selling were weak, and da Silva’s connections to the police and judiciary were strong. All they needed was a “five star hospital” and a competent surgical staff. Both were located. But just a few weeks before the first “transplant tours” were to arrive in Recife, federal police arrested 11 members of the organs trafficking ring. Several of the principal figures were convicted and given jail sentences ranging from one to 11 years, with Gaddy and da Silva receiving the stiffest penalties.

On our next visit, Gaddy’s jailers did not bring him out as usual but invited us to pass the day with the prisoner in his cell. The visit

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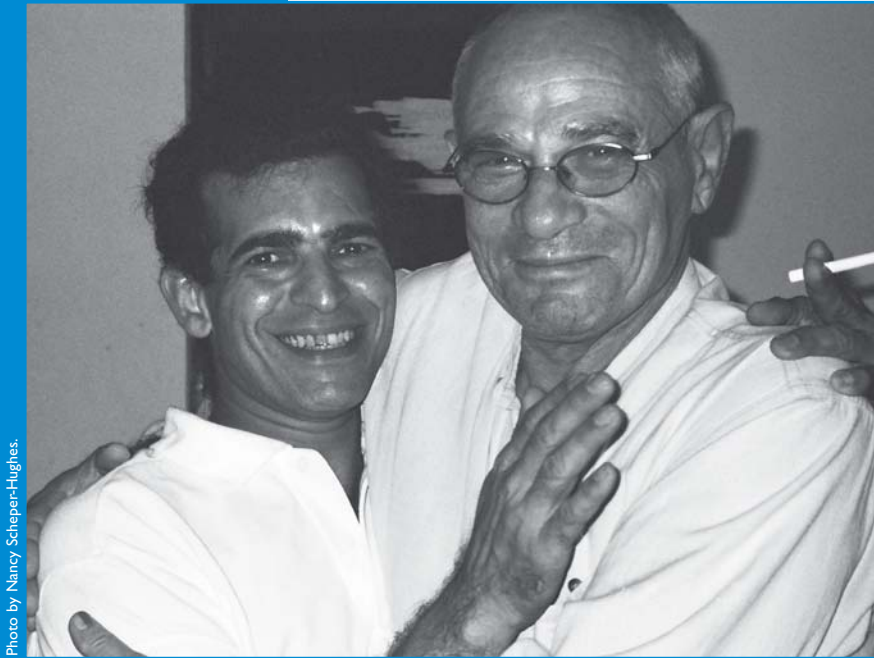


Photo by Nancy Scheper-Hughes.

Gaddy and Geremias.

would be private and only cursorily supervised by a military guard who might pass by to check on us from time to time.

I balked, remembering the warning given me by the undercover agent who had nabbed Gaddy, Federal Police Chief Karla Gomes Matos Maia. “Don’t be fooled by Tauber,” she had said. “He is a trickster, a liar and a dangerous sociopath. He will play with you, charm you, even amuse you, but he is totally capable of killing you.” While awaiting trial, Tauber had sent “feelers” from his prison cell at the state penitentiary, Aníbal Bruno, into the slums of Recife looking for a hit man to knock off Gomes and the judge, Amanda Torres de Lucena. When an informant told police about Gaddy’s search for a *pistoleiro*, the prisoner was removed to Henrique Dias, a higher security prison at military headquarters.

Ludimir, a tough investigative reporter, did not hesitate for a second, and when he eagerly entered Gaddy’s locked cell, I followed suit. Energized by having his visitors entirely to himself, Gaddy launched into the story of his arrest and the abuses he had endured. Above all, he was furious about his portrayal in the local media as a “monster, an Israeli Mengele” and the anti-Semitic slurs he suffered from police. “Everyone hates Jews; even Brazilians are anti-

Semites,” Gaddy said bitterly. He seemed startled when I asked him why, then, had he participated in a scheme that had done such great damage to Israel.

He evaded my question, instead seeking to portray himself not only as a victim of the Holocaust and the savior of sick Jews but also as the patron saint of the impoverished kidney sellers. He challenged me to consider the poverty of the *meninos*, their willingness, indeed their eagerness to sell, and their right to dispose of their bodies as they saw fit. No one was forcing them to do anything, he charged. In fact, they were begging to be part of the group. “I was saving lives in both countries, in Israel and in Brazil,” he argued. It was a defense I had heard many times before from body brokers in the Philippines, Turkey and Moldova. But it was only in Brazil where many of the sellers agreed with their brokers.

As Gaddy prepared lunch for us on a little camp stove — homemade soup made from skinny chicken wings, wilted celery, onions, cilantro and a single, dirt-encrusted carrot — he spoke heatedly about his rescue of my own field assistant, Geremias (“Gere”) Belarmino, one of the kidney sellers. Out of a job and unable to pay his rent, Gere was facing homelessness. He was about to take his wife and three small children to live in a cardboard shanty when Gaddy offered him the “opportunity” to travel to Durban.

“I tried to protect the boy at first; I told him he was too smart to sell himself this way; I felt like a father toward him, and so I turned him away,” Gaddy claimed. Geremias was insistent, and he offered to do anything at all for the “company,” including cleaning Gaddy’s apartment, shining his shoes, translating and interpreting Portuguese, whatever was needed. Gaddy relented, and Geremias got to sell his kidney. When he returned, Gere agreed to work for Tauber as a part-time interpreter, and he hoped to be included as an official guide and translator for the new Recife transplant tour scheme.

Gaddy’s version of the story coincided with what Geremias himself had told me. And I recalled the transcript of Gere’s deposition to Judge Torres de Lucena: “What father, seeing a bullet headed straight for his children’s heads,

wouldn't throw his own body in front of the gun to defend them?" When the judge countered that Geremias' children were not facing a death threat, Gere responded: "No, you are right. But they were facing something even worse, a life threat. And to save them, your honor, I would have sold not only a kidney, but an eye, a liver, or even my heart, and I would have died happy to see them safely housed." Geremias had come to Tauber's defense during his trial, saying that Gaddy was the only person to help him when every social agency in Recife had turned him down in his time of dire need. "Gaddy Tauber may have been a crook who was taking advantage of the desperation of the poor, but even so, we all gained something out of it as well. I don't regret anything."

Despite the open, foul-smelling toilet located a few feet from the camp stove, despite the dirty vegetables and the grey-looking chicken wings, the savory aroma coming from the cooking pot made my empty stomach rumble. As he carefully spooned soup into two little plastic containers, one for me and one for Julio, but none for himself, I protested: "Oh please, Gaddy, you first."

Tauber demurred, grinning like a Cheshire cat: "I'll eat later, after you leave." Pouring a little whiskey into his coffee mug [how did he ever get that, I wondered?], he lit another cigarette.

"Oye, Julio," I said, "I think this is a test." But Julio had already dug in and was slurping loudly. Hunger, as they say, is the best sauce, and we both ate greedily, even taking seconds.

As we ate, Gaddy asked me how I had come to Brazil. Since he had revealed his secrets to me, I told him briefly about my years living in a rural shantytown as a Peace Corps volunteer in the mid-1960s and my return in the 1980s as an anthropologist studying mother love and child death. Gaddy listened intently, and he asked intelligent questions. When I described the way some infants, lacking what shantytown mothers called "a knack for life" were let go, not only allowed to die but helped to die, Gaddy nodded his head knowingly.

"Do you know what they were?" Gaddy asked.

"No, what?"

"Those babies were little Musselmen."

I was taken aback. A few years after the publication of *Death without Weeping*, I had thought of that same analogy while re-reading Primo Levi's description of the living dead, the



Photo by Nancy Scheper-Hughes.

Musselmen, the sub-population of camp victims whose exhaustion was so great, whose despair was so palpable that they looked and behaved like walking mummies. These men and women were avoided and stigmatized as having succumbed, as having "given up" all hope and with it, their humanity. Thus, were they also "given up on" by those around them.

"Yes, those angel-babies were little Musselman."

Before we left his cell, for what was to be my final visit to the prison on this trip, Gaddy took my hand and kissed it and, without giving it a second thought, I reciprocated. I asked if there was anything he needed that I could provide. He had only one request: "Whatever you do, promise not to turn me into a monster."

"I promise; and you take care of yourself," I said.

"I survived Hitler, I survived Stalin. I can certainly survive this."

Nancy Scheper-Hughes is Professor of Anthropology at UC Berkeley. This article is based on a chapter, "Schindler's Other List," in her forthcoming book *Parts Unknown: The Global Traffic in Organs* (University of California Press).

Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Gaddy in his cell.