

The Portuguese in France: torn between two worlds

Fleeing the Salazar regime, hundreds of thousands of Portuguese came to France in the 1960s, quietly forming the most significant European immigration since the war. **JACQUELINE KARP** talks to some immigrants about the struggle between trying to fit into a new country and staying true to their roots

TURN up at around nine in the morning at the Canto de Saudades restaurant in Champigny-sur-Marne and you are sure to hear Portuguese. The average age will be 65, and the subject of conversation at the bar is likely to be last summer in Trás-os-Montes. For this suburb, south-east of Paris, was once the site of France's – and probably Europe's – largest shanty town. Its estimated population of 12,000 was 98% Portuguese. In 2012, the restaurant, which stands on the site of the old shanty, was the venue for commemorating the 40th anniversary of its destruction.

France has always worked as a magnet. Since the early second-home buyers in the Dordogne, it has drawn thousands of British migrants in the past 20 years, a mix of retirees and young couples in search of a better lifestyle. If an overcrowded, multicultural Britain was generally the push factor, space, country air and education were high on the pull-factor list. The Portuguese, on the other hand, were pushed out by poverty, by the repressive Salazar regime and its disastrous colonial wars.

Mass migration into the Hexagon dates from the end of the 19th century, and the British are among the last in a long line. Successive waves have blended into the French landscape – Russian Jews, Polish miners, Italian labourers – only their names hinting today at their foreign background.

Of the major national groups that came – from Italy, Spain, Portugal and Algeria – the Portuguese stand out. Referred to as “invisible immigrants”, on account of their apparent ease at integrating, they have made Paris the second largest Portuguese city in Europe, behind Lisbon – but well ahead of Porto. For them, arriving in the 1960s and 70s (fewer after the 1974 bloodless Carnation Revolution that toppled the dictatorship), the pull factor was plentiful employment in France.

How many Portuguese live in France today? It is hard to say. For the national statistics institute, INSEE, the current Portuguese population of France is around 600,000-650,000 if you do not count bi-nationals. Radio Alfa, France's biggest foreign language radio station, claims a potential audience of 800,000.

José Barros, director of FASTI, the Fédération des Associations de Solidarité avec les Travailleurs Immigrés, a national organisation

helping immigrants, estimates that the entire Portuguese community, including the young third generation, at closer to the million mark, though estimating the latest influx of migrants and those in France on temporary work contracts is difficult, since no residence or work permits are needed for EU citizens.

If the British headed for the countryside, the Portuguese, fleeing rural northern Portugal without exit visas or work permits, headed for the towns. The perilous migration, crossing hostile Spain then the Pyrénées, often on foot, is well portrayed in Franco-Portuguese film director José Vieira's 2005 documentary, *Les Gens du Salto* – the people of the leap – as the journey was called.

Once in France, during the post-war economic boom called *les Trente Glorieuses*, papers were easy to get. Major elements of the Paris landscape – the RER, the périphérique, the Tour Montparnasse, La Défense as well as the clusters of suburban tower blocks surrounding the cities – owe a lot to their muscle power.

“Many of the Portuguese working in France today have become artisans in the building trade,” explains historian Marie-Christine Volovitch-Tavares, author of a history of the Champigny-sur-Marne shanty town. “But their parents were illiterate manual labourers, totally unskilled, doing the digging that no French workers wanted to do. The Portuguese were popular with employers, they benefited, for ideological reasons, from French antagonism towards Algerians generated by the Algerian war of independence. Having lived in a repressive dictatorship, with a strong church, they were docile workers. In addition, the Portuguese secret police was in France, checking on political activity. They toed the line for fear of expulsion.”

But if France took every documented migrant it could find, it failed badly in accommodating them. An earlier film

entitled *O Salto* (1967) – *The Leap* – by Christian de Chalonge traces the terrible conditions in which these workers lived. They crowded into the south-west, into all the major cities, Versailles, Lyons, Bordeaux, Clermont-Ferrand, where they worked in the Michelin factory, and Marseilles, as well as the factories and furnaces of eastern and northern France.

Today, there are large Portuguese communities in practically every part of France. But although there are more than 800 Portuguese associations, each is small and local. Barros sees two different types of migration: the 1960s migrants were mainly men, who sent money home. By the 1970s, they came with their wives and wanted to start a new life in France. The women made the difference. They worked as home helps or as *concierges*, in contact with the French population. With little education themselves, they pushed their children to work hard at school.

The next generation: Antonio, Catherine and Diamantino

Look under *maçon* in the yellow pages in practically any area of France you happen to live in, and you will find Portuguese names. The Portuguese builder is as much a cliché in France as the Polish plumber in the UK. But if many next-generation immigrants have naturally been through school and university and blended into mainstream French life, their relationship with their Portuguese past is often complicated.

Computer company director Antonio de Sousa, 40, refused to speak Portuguese to his parents as a child, but now regrets that his own children do not speak the language.



The film *La Cage Dorée* about a Portuguese concierge in Paris captures the immigrants' attitude to the French and how they were torn between Portugal and France



José de Freitas was born on the island of Madeira, but was forced to flee Portugal in 1970

That fraught relationship of the next generation with their families is the subject of his novel, *Excellence d'un immigré intégré*.

For second-generation Paris French teacher Catherine Vaz de Lima (37), it is a period her father talks of even today with difficulty. “I know he lived in a shed at the bottom of a garden, that he suffered from hunger and cold, but that's all. Portugal is still immensely important to him, and he weeps every summer when it is time to leave: he suffers from *saudade*, that mix of melancholy and nostalgia unique to the Portuguese.”

Because her mother was French, Portuguese was never spoken at home. Catherine has learned the language in adult classes in Paris. “I feel as if I have been deprived of part of my identity, and I want it back.”

Among the next generation, many have remained in the building trade, setting up their own small businesses. Diamantino Gomes, 42, Diamant for short, arrived here aged six in 1977 to join his parents who had found work in a Paris electric cable factory.

After a two-year DUT building course, he set up his own construction business, employing his own father, at the time out of work, and his younger brother. He now runs a building diagnostics company in south-east Paris. “When you've been brought up as I was, by my grandparents, with no running water, no electricity, and no toilets, many of today's problems seem relatively minor. It was a good foundation.”

Diamant has never taken French nationality, though he does not feel part of any expat Portuguese

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Historian Marie-Christine Volovitch-Tavares

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Diamantino Gomes



community. His wife is French. "My parents found that hard, having to adapt to speaking French to her and the children. Like many Portuguese, they are ill at ease with the French. They feel inferior."

"The film *La Cage Dorée* about a Portuguese *conciierge* in Paris captures exactly the Portuguese attitude to the French and their being torn between Portugal and France." [2013, director Ruben Alves, now out on DVD]

Diamant does not go to Portugal often. "I already work hard enough and have very few days off. If I went back to the village where I was born every summer, just because I happen to have been born there, it seems to me a waste of good holiday time."

The impossible return

"Those who came in the 1960s all thought they'd return home one day," says José Barros. "But in the past 10 or 15 years, now they are retired, they suddenly realise that it is impossible. Their children have grown up and work here, their grandchildren live here. Why go back? So there is a to-ing and fro-ing among the older generation, the summer months spent in Portugal in a house they have built, the rest of the year in France."

A minority has gone back for good, not always with success. They find a new Portugal nothing like the country they left, and they are not always well accepted.

One exception is Antonio Costa Coelho, 74, who runs a big handicraft shop opposite the famous monastery, in Batalha, central Portugal. After his best friend was killed during military service in Angola, he decided to get out and avoid enlistment. He took the leap in 1962, yet after a busy life working first with Citroën, then as a private chauffeur for the director of the Béghin-Say sugar refinery among others, he decided to come home.

"We had no problem settling back in. Maybe because we had the shop to run, and we came with our teenage children. I love France, and go back often. My children have been through university there. But

nostalgia for Portugal won in the end. I've never regretted it."

Fatima da Silva

Like the Moulin Rouge, Chez Fatima never closes. Seven days a week and all the hours the da Silva family team – wife, husband, daughter, son and daughter-in-law – can muster, this corner shop to beat all corner shops sells bread, groceries, Portuguese specialities, flowers and floral arrangements.

Open since 1995, Chez Fatima has become an institution in the sleepy town of Barbezieux St Hilaire, Charente, with its fewer than 5,000 inhabitants. Built when the N10, with its unending lines of thundering Spanish and Portuguese artics, still crossed the town, the shop has miraculously survived the bypass.

"The Portuguese drivers all know of us," says Fatima. "When they're blocked on a Sunday, they find a welcome here, and in Portuguese!" Nearby Angoulême has a major Portuguese community, but Barbezieux does not.

The Portuguese specialities – pasta, beans, cakes, wines, *porto* and huge chunks of *bacalhau* – are popular with French people who love Portugal. And if it's the flowers that bring the crowds – on Mother's Day, All Saints, or St Valentine's you cannot squeeze past to buy a baguette – there is a regular flow of customers for forgotten items, and when supermarkets are closed.

In 2003, the Mayor of Barbezieux decorated Fatima with a medal for her work and praised her for being a model of integration in the community. Only months from retirement, Fatima has come a long way from the little girl of nine who got up at 3am to travel from one market stand to the next to sell salt cod. "I was third in a family of nine. I gave all of the money I earned to my mother. We were so very poor it never occurred to me to do otherwise," she says.

In 1971 she came to France with her future father-in-law to marry Adelino, a young man from north of Aveiro, who she had met briefly at a folklore



The Chez Fatima corner shop in Barbezieux, Charente, sells bread, groceries, Portuguese specialities, flowers and floral arrangements

festival two years earlier.

Like Antonio, Adelino had fled to avoid enlistment.

"My mother pushed me out," he says. "Either way you'll have to leave," she told me. 'If you go to Angola, you'll be coming home in a coffin.' So I came to France and found work straight away, in a sawmill."

Since then, he has spent more than 29 years working in the Cognac vineyards. But Fatima was determined not to spend her life doing that. "I've sold everything under the sun, and can sell anything!" she laughs. "Business sense is in my blood!" When the petrol crisis left her reduced to a part-time cleaning job, she knocked on the door of the town hall and landed herself a job in a grocery shop. When that closed down, she set up business for herself.

"We've never looked back. My daughter has a diploma in international commerce, my son in accountancy. Both had good jobs but both begged me to let them into the business. So now we are five and loving it."

Adelino looks up at the TV above the cash desk and flips from Radio TV Portugal to TF1, from forest fires in the Serra da Estrela to political debate in Paris. "We could have gone back," says Fatima, "after the fall of Salazar." But her husband shakes his head, "We had work here, why return

to poverty?"

They do go, three or four times a year, but are adamant that home is here in France. "We speak Portuguese with the children and our own mix of French and Portuguese when there's just the two of us. My daughter has dual nationality, but we don't and nor does my son. He didn't want to be called up in France."

"My father came a year after me, my mother and all my brothers and sisters came soon afterwards. So why go back? They're spread all over France. We're Portuguese through and through but we love France. When you've lived in a place for 42 years, it's home."

José de Freitas

Nothing in the quiet existence of Ministry of Health civil servant José de Freitas even hinted that he would finish his career in charge of a huge glass-melting furnace in the Vosges.

The voice trembles a little and the Portuguese accent is clearly audible, but the French is fluent. Born in 1945 on the island of Madeira, José was sent, on his mother's death, at the age of five, to the prestigious boarding school of Nun'Álvares in Tomar, central Portugal. "Our teachers were reputedly opposed to the Salazar dictatorship. So even as adolescents, we were under surveillance."

After one year at Coimbra University, where he became involved


in politics, José had to leave and took a job as a civil servant in the Ministry of Health in Lisbon. He stayed there for nearly six years, continuing his political engagement until it forced him to flee in 1970.

"One day we were in Lisbon, the next my wife and I were fleeing across Spain. Franco's Spain was as bad as Salazar's Portugal and their police worked alongside ours, so until we were safely over the French border, we feared arrest from one minute to the next. Once in France, I had cousins in Neufchâteau, near Nancy, and I started straight away there in a furniture factory."

"I already spoke some French, and soon I was in a position of responsibility over French employees in the glass factory, so I was speaking French. But my wife worked in a spinning mill, surrounded by other Portuguese women. She's never really learned French."

José has no regrets about exile in France. "After the 1974 Revolution, the Portuguese consulate in Nancy contacted me to ask if I'd return to my job at the Ministry of Health. I think my wife would have gone, but I had made my life here, and I was earning better money too."

Like so many Portuguese migrants, he has never taken French nationality. "I wanted to, but my wife was dead against it. So I didn't insist."



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