

Synopsis:

« FOR A BETTER LIFE » PORTUGUESE EMIGRATION

A photographic essay by
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Greater Paris - Lisbon - Oporto - Chavès - Pyrenees - Hendaye
1954- 1974

When I was a child, in Haïti, in the middle of the Caribbean, I was fascinated by a little country on the map: Portugal...a tiny country but the origin of so many explorers ! I promised myself to go there, one day.

As a young rebel expelled from Haïti when I was 20, I used my cameras as arms to highlight misery and injustice. I photographed men at work. I met some Portuguese in the fifties on the building sites of France, then in the middle of its postwar reconstruction. They weren't the great explorers of whom I had dreamed, but hard-working, discreet and methodical stone masons. I wanted to know where they lived. I visited their shanty-towns in the evenings when the men came home from work, with mud all around. Saint-Denis, Champigny, Massy... Initially somewhat suspicious, they ended up allowing me in. They understood that I didn't want to dramatise their misery but instead, that I wanted to show their dignity, their solidarity, their courage, and also the liveliness of the children and the way they looked you straight in the eye...

I wanted to understand, myself an exile, what had pushed these people to leave their country to arrive on the outskirts of Paris, in their hovels made of planks and sheet metal and their streets of mud.

I took their path of emigration in the opposite direction. From the platforms of Austerlitz train station where they alighted, bent in two under the weight of their bags – their only possessions – to the station in Hendaye, where they awaited their connection. I took the train with whole families, children asleep in their black-clothed grandmothers' arms, and parents, young and strong, full of hope for a "better life".

Between 1960 and 1970, more than 800.000 Portuguese left their country of 7 million, totally suffocated under Salazar's dictatorship. Starting in 1961, in order to keep a hold on its empire in Africa, Portugal began to send troops to counter uprisings in Angola, and after 1964, in Mozambique as well. Emigration reached a peak in 1965 for young men seeking to avoid military service and war. In 1966 alone, 120,000 Portuguese arrived in France.

In 1966, I went to Lisbon, to Oporto, and to the mountains north of Chavès. The country was bled dry, frozen. Here too were shanty towns. Here too was mud in the streets of the villages, where the only people who remained were women, children and the old.

I walked with men who crossed the Pyrenees on foot. They refused that I take their photograph. Emigration was a clandestine activity and the border guards of Franco's Spain, collaborating with Salazar's regime, would send back any migrants caught in the mountains.

But even if Salazar's regime officially forbade emigration, it was nonetheless encouraged : the emigrants' money helped to finance wars. And it didn't pose any problem to France to welcome in this European labour force, judged easier to integrate than those coming from North Africa....without necessarily doing anything concrete to help them settle in.

When the *Carnation Revolution* erupted in April 1974, with the overthrow by young army captains of Salazar's successor, the dictator Caetano, I took a plane for Lisbon with a group of exiled political leaders. Three days and three nights of reveling in the streets of Lisbon, flooded with the red carnations of the Revolution, on the eve of the 1st of May of freedom. Some Portugese came back home....but not all. Had they found a « better life » ?

In 1986, Portugal joined the European Union.

Twenty-two years later, in February 2008, the Berardo Museum of Modern Art in Bélem (Lisbon) presented an exhibition called « For a better life ». The same year, the town of Fafe (north west of Oporto) opened a Museum of Emigration where a hundred of my photographs are preserved. In 2009, exhibition moved to the Neumünster Abbey Cultural Centre, in Luxembourg, another important destination for Portugese emigrants, and then in 2010, back to Portugal to the Centre for Visual Arts in Braga.

Tongues are loosening and memories are opening up in many families. At last, people dare to relate the long-hidden history of muddy streets to their children, nephews, brothers and parents of emigrants.

Today there are around one million people of Portugese origin living in France. For all that, no one talks anymore of one of the biggest immigrations that France has known. The Portugese have become invisible. Their integration is considered to have succeeded.

My photographs serve as a reminder that hardly 50 years ago, these Portugese, before becoming Europeans with one of their own presiding the European Commission, were clandestine, illegal immigrants, fleeing poverty, dictatorship and war in Africa to come to settle in miserable shanty towns.

The images of this story break the stereotypes and find some parallels in the situation of many immigrants today.

In 2012, Portugal fell victim to the economic crisis and austerity measures, and the young unemployed are again thinking about leaving.

« For a better life » continues its trip throughout France. In Bordeaux, Hendaye, and then Paris in 2013 at the *Cité nationale de l'histoire de l'immigration* (May 14-July 31).

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