

MARTIN PAGE

THE FIRST  
GLOBAL VILLAGE

How Portugal Changed the World

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casadasletras

To the memory of Pedro da Cunha,  
and the lasting friendship of his family.

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## A PERSONAL INTRODUCTION

It was the middle of the afternoon. The Congo was in the midst of another civil war. I was a novice foreign correspondent, newly arrived from London, and I was standing beside the road from Ndola to Elizabethville. Four of my ribs were cracked. My left shoulder was fractured. The barrel of a sub-machine gun was being pressed gently into my back, by a Katangese militiaman, while his colleagues helped themselves to the contents of my luggage from the wreck of the hire-car.

There was a flow of traffic, of white, southern-African mercenaries in cars and other stolen vehicles, escaping the battle-zone I had been trying to reach. Several drivers slowed, and seeing the militia, accelerated again. It seemed to me that over fifty of them passed me by. Then came a new, white Peugeot estate. The driver slammed his brakes, reversed back towards me, opened the rear passenger door, and shouted: "Jump in."

"There's a gun in my back."

"That's why I'm telling you: jump in."

I obeyed. He sped off. With my shoulder broken, I could not close the door, but the wind shut it. We approached the border-post. The driver sounded his three-tone horn, flashed his head-lights, and accelerated. The guards, apparently fearing he would smash their new barrier, hurriedly raised it. We were out of the self-proclaimed Republic of Katanga. But why had the guards let us through, not opened fire on us?

"They've got no ammunition. They haven't been paid any wages. We give them cigarettes they can trade for food."

I looked at the reflection of his face, in the driving mirror. His grave, slightly wry expression was unmoving. Like his companion, he was in his thirties, with a southern European complexion, dark hair, a carefully trimmed moustache. They were dressed in freshly laundered white shirts. A small crucifix and a medallion of Our Lady hung from gold chains around each of their necks.

They told me they were cigarette smugglers, into the Congo, from what is now Zambia. They drove me to the clinic at the copper mine at Kitwe, where I was x-rayed, injected and bound. They took me to the mining company's rest-house, and introduced me to the English manager.

She said: "Morning tea is at half past five."

"I won't be wanting any. I need to rest."

"I'm sorry," she said. "If I make an exception for you, all the other gentlemen would ask for one, wouldn't they? Last breakfast in the dining room at 6.30."

She put a phone call through for me, to Terence Lancaster, my foreign editor in London. Terry said: "I'm very sorry to hear of your mishap. But there's a riot in Cape Town, at the cigarette factory. If you don't get there by tomorrow, I'll break your other shoulder."

My rescuers bought me a large South African brandy at the bar, gave me 500 *Rothmans*, checked my wallet to see I had enough cash, then left me, delivered back to my native culture, never to see them again. It was the first time I had met Portuguese knowingly – and my first encounter, not only with their extraordinary reaching-out to a stranger in need, but with their blend of bravado, honour, ingenuity and poise.

\* \* \*

I went to Tokyo, to promote the Japanese translation of *The Company Savage*, my satire about the irrational decision-making of business executives. The chief executive of the publishing house first took me to have tea with a reviewer, who had written about it favourably, in *Asahi Shimbun*, the leading business daily. It was clear that I was being honoured. He was one of the most influential and respected gurus in the rising of Japan's economic sun. We arrived at the tower block, which houses the Sofia University, and took a lift to

the top. We entered the ante-room of the suite of the Dean of Business Studies, passed a line of people waiting, and into the corner-office of the great man. I found myself in the presence of a Portuguese Jesuit, in an impeccably cut clerical suit, and as fluent, lively and engaging in English as he clearly was in Japanese.

It is easy to overlook, at least if one is English, that Portuguese, under the co-founder of the Jesuits, São Francisco Xavier, lived in Japan, for generations before our own ancestors knew of its existence. They debated theology with Buddhist monks, before the royal court. They introduced words to the Japanese language, which are still current, including “*orrigato*”, from “*obrigado*”, meaning “thank you”. They brought the recipe for tempura, the favourite fast-food of the Japanese. They taught the technique of manufacturing guns, and constructing buildings which could withstand both artillery attack and earthquake. These structures, in the Portuguese-built city of Nagasaki survived for centuries, and withstood the atomic bomb of 1945 so much better than those of Hiroshima. Portuguese were advisers to the Emperor of China before Marco Polo claimed to have reached there. They brought the chilli plant to India, enabling the invention of “curry”, for the English to discover there, and take home with them as a taste of the British Raj.

The East Timorese won their independence from Indonesia in 1999, after one of the longest and most bitter of such struggles in the post-colonial era. One of their first acts, in the creation of their new state, was to adopt Portuguese as their official language, and recognise the escudo as legal tender. There were powerful emotions behind this decision. The intensity with which people in Portugal espoused the cause of freedom for East Timor was, and is, little understood by other Europeans. To the East Timorese, it was such that the Portuguese language itself became an important symbol of the cause.

From other viewpoints, however, the choice was not as idiosyncratic as many foreigners, particularly Australians, their nearest neighbours and protectors, thought it to be. Portuguese is by far the most difficult of the Latin tongues to master, and so the least susceptible to unwelcome listening-in. It is also the third most spoken European language, after English and Spanish, and before French and German. Brazil and Angola, of course, make a hefty contribution to this little-known statistic. But Portuguese is also the *lingua franca* of cattle ranching in northern California, where bulls are fought in the

ring with spears tipped with Velcro, to conform with state laws against cruelty to animals, and of fishing communities on the New England coast, such as Provincetown and Providence, where Portuguese are rated the most courageous and skilled of seafarers. At the Kennedy family's summer parish church of São Francisco Xavier, in Hyannis, two Masses on Sunday are said in Portuguese.

So it is, behind the swing-doors of London's "Italian" *trattorias*, which are predominantly owned and run by Portuguese impersonating Italians. The low profile of the Portuguese in London was tragically typified, when the party-boat, the *Marchioness*, was rammed and sunk in the Thames by a dredger. Virtually none of the media reported that many of those drowned were young Portuguese investment bankers, working in the City, celebrating a colleague's birthday. Portuguese also own and run over 400 restaurants in Paris, some "Latin American", but mostly "French". The city's newest, most glittering icon – the Louvre pyramid – was built by a Portuguese construction company.

Portuguese is the second language of Johannesburg in South Africa, of Newark, New Jersey, of Luxembourg, and of Caracas, the capital of Venezuela. There are locally-born Portuguese-speaking communities in, among countless places, India, Malaysia, Taiwan and China — as well as in Bermuda, Jersey, Toronto, Los Angeles and Brisbane.

This is not reflected in official figures, largely because most Portuguese abroad are citizens of their country of residence. But as Mário Soares said: "Language is the bond. To speak Portuguese is to be Portuguese." They are all around, speaking so quietly, few of us hear their presence.

\* \* \*

On Easter morning, 1988, Catherine and I, and our two sons, Matt and Sam, woke in our new home on the Cabo da Roca, the great peninsula that juts from the Serra da Sintra, west of Lisbon, into the Atlantic. From the terrace, we saw the sun transformed by the rising mist, into a silver disc. The moon was still shining, above the wooded *serra*, behind the house, where, in the night, wolves howled and foxes prowled. In the sky, a white eagle and two falcons hovered. In the meadow beside us, wild flowers, and bushes of