



Onésimo Teotónio Almeida

Emily Reinl:

All right, this is Emily Reinl.

It is September 23rd, 2022 and I am here with Onésimo from the Portuguese Advisory Committee. Go ahead.

Onésimo Teotónio Almeida:

Yes, I'm Onésimo and I decided to... When I was asked about telling a story about myself, I thought that I should talk about my relationship to America through my family when I was young. Both sides of my family have been connected to the United States on the parts of my father. My great grandparents came to New Bedford. One of them was from the Island of Graciosa, my great-grandmother, and my great-grandfather was from São Miguel. They lived in New Bedford. They got married at St. John Baptist Church. And then I know, I don't know very much, but I know there's records of them living in Fox Point, Providence. That's where in 1897, my grandmother, my paternal grandmother was born. But then when she was five, her parents decided to return to the Azores and she returned, and never came to the US.

Various of her children, she had 10, came to the US. Two came to live here, in Bristol. But on the other side of the family, my mother's side, my grandfather was in the US for three years, and made some money, returned. But when I was a kid, he always spoke against the US and it was strange for me to have one person I respected so much having a different view from everybody else. America was paradise and he hated it. He told me, "Everything they tell you about America is wrong and they have not been there. I know because I have been there." And for me as a kid, five years old, I remember this was very strange.

Later on, I learned that my grandfather was here through the Depression and he returned after the Depression. He lived in New York and also in Fall River. He left with him, this bad impression of America and with a firm decision of never setting foot in the US again.

But one of his daughters married a Portuguese American from a town close by, was here in Fall River, and she was the youngest one. And she came to America. Another one of his daughters married a guy who had gone to Canada, to Quebec. Her son went to Brazil. My aunt here in the United States, the youngest one, the youngest sister of my mother. Was always trying to convince the whole family to reunite here in the US. She tried very hard, but my grandfather was adamant, no way. But when he died with cancer, he was still young, 60-something. The family decided, let us all reunite in the US.

So my uncle in Brazil was living and was doing very, very well, but he didn't like the political situation. Moved to the US. My aunt was married in Canada, in Quebec, decided to come to the US and join the family. And my mother came with the family... I was the only one who stayed in Portugal and also my sister, who had gotten married, and decided to stay... Came with my maternal grandmother and they lived for about two decades in four houses. All close to each other.

So I think that this is a story that tells you, first of all, of how strong a Portuguese family can be. Because in spite of the fact that one goes to Brazil, one goes to Canada, others stay in the Azores and they had the desire to regroup. So my brothers and sisters lived together here with their cousins, who 10 years earlier, were growing up as young kids in the Azores.

Emily Reinl:

Where was this? Was this here in New Bedford, that they-



Onésimo Teotónio Almeida:

In Fall River. In Fall River. Holden Street, Fall River. Four houses. All close to each other. Yes.

Emily Reinl:

Do you have any stories about what that was like living in Fall River at that time?

Onésimo Teotónio Almeida:

Yes.

I came later, four years after my mother came, I was studying in Lisbon. I wanted to go to Paris and my mother said, "If you go to Paris, I will not support you at all. But if you want to come to the US, here is a plane ticket." So I came here.

And it was very... Some of the people in my family were already integrated because I had cousins already born here. They were Americans. But there was a very strong Portuguese-American connection already. Talking about the early seventies, and there were new arrivals, there was a wave. The biggest wave of immigration from the Azores was occurring since 1965.

So I came to spend three months in the United States, in the summer of 1970, and I could live in Fall River and I traveled actually all the way to Canada and to New York. And within the Portuguese circles, my English was poor, broken, very broken. But I did a lot of things, always within the Portuguese Circle. It was already possible to live in the US, do everything, within the Portuguese Circle. They were all doing it very well. They were adapting very well. And so my family, overall, has done well.

But I did not want to stay in the US. I wanted to return, because my mind was set on Paris, and Fall River could not compare with Paris.

But the following summer, my mother, insisted that I had to come and join the family, at least for the summer. So I came, but I decided to spend some time not just going around to the parties, and dinners, and getting together with friends. I decided to sign up for a freshman english course at Southeastern Massachusetts University. Now it's UMass Dartmouth. One thing that happened to me was I liked the university system in the US very much and the following year I came again and did the same thing. And then, on my third visit I decided to stay as long as I could continue studying because I was impressed with the university system. So I came, I applied to Brown, I got accepted and then I stayed. But it took me a while to get converted.

Emily Reinl:

What was it that you liked so much about the university system?

Onésimo Teotónio Almeida:

Plenty of... Well I liked the interaction of students and teachers. I liked the setting. The university was a rich environment where lots of things were happening and the libraries were great. The resources available were immense compared to Portugal. But I particularly liked the style. The teaching style.

There was not... In Portugal, there was lots of lecturing and they were often boring because the teacher... Here, there was a demand for student participation. We had to read the material before and we had to discuss the material with the teacher.

I felt that, here, students were treated not as kids who had to simply soak the knowledge that is handed down by the teacher. The system involved us immensely. It allowed us to go on our own, by ourselves, enter new worlds and discover things for ourselves. And feel the growth that was taking place within ourselves, and feel enthusiastic, and wanting to do more. Realizing that, "Look, if this is going to happen, I have to do it."

This was the energy that I got from the university system here. And since the resources were plentiful, there was



never enough time to take advantage of everything, and this is what really attracted me. This is why I stayed here.

Emily Reinl:

Wonderful.

Have you ever considered moving back to Portugal or were you, at that point, fully converted?

Onésimo Teotónio Almeida:

I was fully converted. But I will always remain Portuguese. I always consider myself Portuguese.

But then I got involved in Portuguese studies, and because of that, I had to stay in touch with the Azores. With Portugal. So every year I would go, not only in the summer, but throughout the year.

Once in a while, even in the eighties... I remember being in Lisbon on Sunday, flying to the US, teaching here on Monday and Tuesday, and returning on Tuesday night to be in Lisbon on Wednesday morning. In the eighties, I already did that. And then this increased in such a way that, before the pandemic, I was going to Portugal about 10 times a year. So I did stay in touch, very much.

I talk... I have a book called Atlantic River, and for me the Atlantic is a river. There're two banks of the river. One is the US and one is Portugal, with a little spot in the middle, the Azores. Where you can stop and rest for a while before you continue your trip.

So, I have always lived in between. I say I feel totally comfortable when I land.

When I land in Lisbon, when I land in Ponta Delgada, and when I land in Boston. I feel at home in the three places and in this back and forth.

Emily Reinl:

Thank you. This has been great.

Before I stop the recording, are there any final, anything final you want to-

Onésimo Teotónio Almeida:

I think that would be all my 10 minutes.

Emily Reinl:

Okay. Well thank you.