

Immigration to Canada: An interview with an Azorean-Canadian

Interviewer: Anna Yamashita

Interviewee: Filomena Cavaco Yamashita

Introduction

In the fall of 2015, I took a course on the History of the Azores at the University of Toronto taught by Dr. Manuela Marujo. I grew up in Canada with immigrant parents, and growing up in North America, my knowledge about Azorean culture and history was very limited. I decided to take this course to learn about the islands, and build an understanding of my Azorean heritage, and why Azoreans are such a mobile people, seen all around the world. To deepen my understanding of immigration from the Azores to Canada, I decided to interview my mother who emigrated from the Azores at a young age. The following interview is a look into one immigration experience, and is not meant to serve as a “norm” for immigration, but rather a personal account of one experience.

Background information

Name: Filomena Cavaco Yamashita, born in Nordeste, Sao Miguel on March 21, 1959 but lived most my childhood in Ponta Delgada

1. What year did you come to Canada? Age? From what Island?

I came to Toronto, Canada in 1980 at the age of 21 from Sao Miguel.

2. Describe your childhood (family, friends, hobbies, significant events)

My childhood was filled with family gatherings and trips around the island. We had many visits to the houses of other family members where they would talk, and share wine and fruit that was in season. These gatherings were a time to dress up and be together. My mother was a teacher, and came from a long line of teachers; she instilled the value of education in me. My grandmother was also a teacher and worked very hard to put all of her 4 children through school and university; she would always say “Our education is your economic independence.” My father was a civil servant in the Obras Publicas Department-- known for making a small natural pool in Nordeste that is also open to the ocean and for opening up the country side to tourism by creating roads that do not disrupt the natural beauty of the Island.

I grew up in a big family and was youngest of 5; we were much closer to my mother’s side of the family because most of my father’s extended family had emigrated abroad. My hobbies included crocheting, knitting fixing things around the house and hanging out with friends at the beach. Religion was a big part of life as well, I participated in both the *Festa do Senhor Santo Cristo*, and the *Festa do Espirito Santo* (The first big one was held in 1976, and my father was one of the organizers for it.) It was historically important because the archipelago was very religious and against the revolution, and this served as one of the first protests against the unfair imprisonment citizens who supported the independence of the Azores from the continent as the view became increasingly left-wing. Another *feira* was the *Festa do Senhor da Pedra*, this *feira* took place in Vila Franca and was very famous and miraculous, provided me with the chance to stay for a week in Vila Franca with my aunt and grandmother. This experience was extremely coveted by my peers because Vila Franca was known as “the resort destination” on the island, and served as the only entry point to a small island off the coast of Sao Miguel, Ilheu, which was exclusive to certain people.

3. Comparing your childhood to those around you, what class would you say you were in and why?

I think I would be considered upper middle class, I grew up in a relatively large home, with real flooring, and parents who had steady jobs, and who were well-known to the townships because of my father's civil duties. Most other families lived in very small homes in small towns/ villages, sometimes with only one room and dirt floors. Their professions were usually to work on the fields of the land owners, and they were often looked down on because they were descendants of immigrants.

Note: this was in the country side, in the city there was a stark difference, people did not have dirt floors but there were other clear signs of poverty in the cities as well.

The classes were very divided, and had allowed for very little movement between them. As far as I remember the different groups were the impoverished, land owners, cattle owners, professionals, politicians, and aristocrats. Poor people were servants, or worked the land and lived off very little. Rarely did they own very small patches of land that they would live off of, but usually that was not enough to support a family.

4. Did any of your family emigrate from the Azores? (Who, what year, where did they go)

My older sister was the first of the immediate family to move abroad, she immigrated to Canada because of her spouse. Her husband had moved there a year earlier because he found a job in British Columbia in the lumber industry. Since he did not even have a high school diploma, it was very difficult to find a well-paid job.

I also remember that my paternal grandfather had come to the United States when he was 16, but the details of that are not very clear. One of my uncles immigrated to Brazil (1950's), originally he went to visit, but ended up staying because of the vast opportunities available to him. I remember my mother mentioning that there are some distant relatives in Brazil, but they are very distant.

5. What was your opinion on emigration?

There was a lot of stigma against those who emigrated because it was assumed that they were too poor and uneducated to survive on the island. They were looked down on because they were lower class and very poor. Looking back now, the prejudice between social groups was rampant and normalized.

6. What made you decide to leave the Azores and move abroad?

Education. Throughout childhood, it was instilled that education was of the utmost importance. After the revolution, although the University of the Azores was founded, it was still extremely primitive. It was too new to be believed in. The mainland was where we felt our education would be recognized. The admission requirements, however, kept changing, and it was clear that they were catering to a specific audience that I was not a part of. Many people who wanted to go to university decided to move away from the Azores and either go to the mainland or further away because of the constant political instability of the ministry of education and its inconsistent ideologies. I initially tried to go to the mainland to study languages at I.S.L.A., but immediately felt the prejudice. Although I was also Portuguese, there was a clear difference between the mainlanders and the Azoreans. After this, I decided to come to Toronto; since my

sister was already here it would be more cost effective. In my third year at the University of Toronto, I went back home to Sao Miguel to visit, and inquired about transferring credits to the University of the Azores, but the university would not take them. It seemed like the University of the Azores was making it unreasonably difficult to even try to come back. It was clear that they didn't feel my Canadian education was comparable to theirs. I kind of felt the "immigrant stigma" on the skin.

7. What consequences were there for your familial, social and professional life after emigrating?

It was very difficult leaving family and friends behind, but it was okay because I hoped to go back to the Azores and teach after finishing university.

8. Explain the Immigration process.

My sister and other Portuguese members of the community guided her through the immigration process. A friend of my sister's husband owned and operated a travel agency. He set me up with a job saying that he needed someone to be a travel agent who spoke both English and Portuguese to help his customers that were mostly Portuguese speakers. Since I had studied English in school, on paper I was the perfect candidate. He sent the work order to the Consulate in Ponta Delgada, allowing me to get an interview and starting the immigration process.

9. Were you told to present yourself in any specific way?

Once arrived in Canada, I was instructed to only mention the job at the travel agency, and not mention education because it would be a red flag in the immigration process. However, when speaking to a customs officer I was told kindly that I would probably end up attending university later on.

10. What is your opinion on the immigration process?

It was very easy, and streamlined. Since I had a job lined up and family who had lived there for over 5 years, the process was much easier than it would have been for other immigrants.

11. Did you experience any racism or prejudice?

No, people were cold but polite. Looking back now, maybe I was just not acquainted with the culture enough to recognize any racism. I did, however, feel prejudice from other Portuguese immigrants. Many seemed to be unkind because they had come to Canada with very little education, and to work, but I was here getting a university degree and working along the way-- a chance that they had never had.

12. Azoreans have been moving to Canada since the 50's, did you have any help from the Portuguese community? Did they help you feel integrated?

Friends of my sister helped a lot; one was a manager at a Canadian bank and got me a job as a bank teller. I worked there throughout university career; it was very helpful in covering living expenses. Most of the support I got was actually from mainland immigrants; they encouraged me to pursue my education and gave me tips on how to go about getting a job.

13. Before moving, what was your opinion of Canada?

No idea, I did not know enough information about the country to make an opinion. All I knew was that coming here presented the opportunity to learn English while still working to support myself and go to University.

14. How did your opinion change once living here?

I thought it was very plain and sloppy; it was very shocking to see how the Portuguese were speaking a language that was vaguely familiar to me. It was a mix of English and Portuguese laden with broken grammar. It seemed that the Portuguese had tried to bring the Portuguese culture here, but the food, fashion and culture were completely different to what I had known at home. As a country, Canada was so big, the streets were very wide, but the buildings were very plain, and the architecture and art was very plain as well. I found that conversations always revolved around money, no matter whom you were talking to. Life here was more accessible, it was easy to get an apartment, car, get an education; the availability of material goods here was much higher than in the Azores but there was something missing.

15. Did you want to be part of the Luso community?

No, my main objective was to learn English and French and be as fluent as possible. I found that being around the Portuguese community, I was surrounded by Portuguese language all the time. I even got transferred to a bank branch outside of the Portuguese community where I helped only mostly Canadians who were native English speakers, which really helped my fluency. Also, coming here I found that I was different from many of the Portuguese people in my life choices and personality. Coming from an upper-middle class family, many thought it was unthinkable to move away from Sao Miguel because in terms of a social life and financial stability, there was no need to leave. I was adamant on getting an education in languages, something that I would not be able to do in the Azores under an unstable series of governments from the mainland. Most of the people in my generation who moved abroad for university, went to the US or Canada.

At the time most of the people who left the Azores were those who had no other option, and left in the search of a better life. This stark difference made it very hard to relate sometimes. Also, having been brought up in a fascist society, it was extremely hard to separate from the social stratification. In Canada, it was very difficult to interact with Portuguese here who would have had different life experiences and upbringing, back in Portugal. It was common for my sister to often hear “Over there you were a *senhora*, but here you’re not we’re all the same”. Although my sister came from a similar upbringing as me, she had a very different way of thinking because she had never lived the revolution, and her husband allowed them to integrate into the community more easily.

16. What was your “Canadian Dream”?

The dream was to go abroad, get a university degree in languages, become fluent and then come back and teach at my high school or one of the schools nearby. I either wanted to be at home, in Ponta Delgada, or someplace completely new, but not a different city on the island or in the Azores in general.

17. What ended up actually happening?

I did try to transfer credits so I could come back and teach, but that was not possible. In the meantime I was offered a position to teach Portuguese and Spanish in Japan. Then when I came back, I went to teachers college here and made a life for myself in Canada.

18. How do you feel about your decision to leave the Azores?

It was a painful and heart breaking decision, and it became the beginning of a fulfilling spiritual journey that has led me to a place where I can now look back and see the Portuguese culture and society from an objective point of view and I see all the problems, and differences from a democratic society. It was shocking because I did not understand what a democracy was or how it would work, staying in Portugal would have led me to believe that it was the best country in the world, and I would never have been able to see how the society could be improved. I am very patriotic, and I love my country and its powerful history, but I am sincerely disappointed that the revolution did not yield all the social change that it could have. It offered the opportunity to instill true change, but no one ever took that opportunity to run with it, therefore now there are still huge inequalities, and the corruption is still there but just by different people. Coming to Canada helped me understand the benefits of a democracy and how it allows opportunities for all people to succeed, and what the revolution was aspiring to do. The reality is that the people of Portugal are still not well educated in valuable social values, and do not seem to understand the importance of sharing resources, and bettering the quality of life for the whole community rather than being motivated only by self-interests, and discrimination is engrained into society. This is a stark contrast from Canada, here everyone has the opportunity for healthcare, and law must treat everyone equally independent of their name, or status.

19. Knowing what you know now, if you could go back and decide to emigrate again, would you?

Probably yes, it was extremely difficult to leave my home, and jump into the unknown, and it is still difficult feeling no sense of belonging, in Canada or in Sao Miguel. However, in Canada, even though there is prejudice and racism, the space is still there to move forward and get ahead because ambition and hard work offer limitless possibilities, and knowing what I know now, the values and ideals of the Azores where you “live to maintain an image”, do not make sense anymore.

20. Would you ever want to go back and live in Sao Miguel?

I would like to go and visit to see my extended family and old friends, and be near the ocean, but the island is a completely different place now. Living there is not something that I would want. It is my roots, it is where I am from, but the negative social values, the social inequalities and the continuously corrupt political system would be too difficult to cope with and get over. I came to Canada as a stranger. Going back, I would be a stranger as well. I have seen both sides of the coin, and I could not foresee myself going back to having the values and views I once had.