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Portuguese Diary 1:

August 1975

Struggles in Alentejo

Evora is at the heart of the Alentejo, and the Alentejo is the heartland of the agrarian revolution. The latifundia are vast and for decades have been neglected. The soil is dry and hard, and upon it grow olives and cork. Wheat and maize would also grow readily if it were ploughed and watered. But this would interfere with the joys of hunting,

It is here that the class struggle has erupted in one of its most advanced forms. The agricultural labourers have seized many of the large estates. In some the former owners have fled, occasionally leaving 'managers' to defend their interests. In others they have remained, seeking to repossess their property through the courts or through direct action. The balance of power varies from village to village, estate to estate.

We sleep on the floor of a large isolated farmhouse about 3 miles out of town. Some 15 Portuguese comrades have been lodging there every night for several months. The farm has been expropriated by the local Institute for Agrarian Reform (IRA) in which libertarian revolutionaries work in uneasy alliance with the representative of the Ministry of Agriculture and members of the local MFA. Their aim is to help the farm workers to solve some of the practical problems which immediately and inevitably crop up in the wake of occupations. The libertarians want to assist, without substituting themselves for those they are seeking to help. It is an almost impossible task.

The farm comprises a large communal living room in which meals are taken at daybreak or sundown. From it passages lead to a number of communicating rooms, stripped of all furniture and fittings, except for mattresses strewn on the floor. There is running water and electricity. There is beer in the fridge and bread and cheese are brought back from the town each day. There are also sten-guns amid the guitars. Dispossessed landlords have threatened to string the young revolutionaries up from the nearest lamp-post at the opportune time, 'when we return to power'. Under such a threat the wine tastes sweeter and life is lived to the full.

On our first evening we drive out in a jeep some 30 miles to Santana do Campo. The villagers have a problem. They want representatives of the IRA there, 'to help them bring pressure on the government'. Several farms were occupied in the morning. The owners have paid no wages for several weeks. Two managers were locked up that very afternoon 'to help the absentee landlord face up to his responsibilities'.

The people are gathered in the local school – 130 agricultural workers with their wives and kids, and quite a number of the old folk. As so often in the countryside, the school is the only public hall. The lights can be seen from a long way off. They illuminate rugged faces, as varied as their owners, and quite unlike the crude stereotyped models of the Maoist posters. The whole village has turned up to elect the Council and to decide what to do with the two men incarcerated in the stable. Everyone knows everyone. Anyone over 16 can be nominated and can cast a vote. Little tickets are handed out. Some of the

older women decline to take one. Anyone can write anyone else's name on the slip. The eight people securing the highest number of votes will constitute the Council. Speeches are unnecessary. It is in struggle, over the last few months, that credentials were earned. The selected names are read out by four 'tellers', the tickets sorted into little piles. The new Council has been elected.

The main problem is then outlined to the visitors from the Evora IRA. Two opinions emerge: a union representative urges caution. (The Agricultural Workers' Union is affiliated to Intersindical, the PCP dominated trade union federation. The Minister of Agriculture, who is sympathetic to the Party, must not be embarrassed.) Others suggest a different course of action. 'Give them no food or drink. Let the news out. The Bank will cough up soon enough'. No one discusses the PCP or its politics as such. The two alternatives are mutually exclusive. The radical proposal secures a majority. The cheque materialises within 24 hours.

The following day we set out in the jeep, in the full heat of the early afternoon, to visit a big farm where the workers are reluctant to impose any kind of control on the owner. The farm, built in 1945, is beautifully laid out. The main buildings and barns are painted blue and white. Cows are grazing in the fields and watch us pass impassively. Only the turkeys noisily announce Our arrival as the jeep edges its way between them, raising a great cloud of dust.

The farm workers are gathered in a large barn, eight or ten of them, sitting on sacks of grain, talking heatedly. Our party enters three young agronomists from the Evora Institute of Agrarian Reform (with long hair and determined expressions), a young officer in uniform (with even longer hair) and us two political tourists. An excited argument gets under way and lasts about an hour. The local MFA is keen to ensure that the workers elect a committee which would exercise some 'control' on the owner and prevent him from doing 'economic sabotage' – such as slaughtering cattle, disposing of his tractors or selling the grain (instead of keeping it for sowing). The workers are not convinced. The farm is a 'model farm'. The boss has maintained reasonable relations with his men, often working among them. The paternalism has had its effects. The men lack confidence. An old, edentulous worker fiercely articulates their innermost fears. 'If we elect a committee, the boss will sack some of us. Work is hard to come by these days. If we make things difficult for him, will he continue to pay our wages? Come on, young man, yes, you with the gun, answer us. Look at all the problems in the other farms in the area!', It is strange to see his innate conservatism clash with the vision of the young revolutionaries. The visitors depart: mission unfulfilled.

Later that afternoon we go to another big farm, 35 miles away in the opposite direction. On the way we pass through whitewashed Alentejo villages, bespattered with red slogans. These villages are strongholds of the PCP. The agricultural workers are natural, genuine, down-to-earth communists. They want to share and share alike. No one seeks individually to

appropriate anything. The Party calls itself communist. The workers vote for it. It's as simple (and as complicated) as that. The inability to read fosters and sustains a fierce radicalism. The workers are not confused by the tortuous ambiguities of the politicians.

The farm, near Oriola, is owned by an absentee Spanish landlord. The last two miles have been very rough track, which only the jeep can cover. The workers have taken the farm over, despite the government's half-hearted undertakings not to allow the expropriation of foreign-owned properties. The men have had no pay for tea weeks. There are big stocks of cork, neatly piled up, to be sold. But the lorry has been stolen. There are problems too with the vegetable produce. To be sold in the cities, refrigeration is needed. People are fed up with eating tomatoes.

The Communist Party's solution to all these problems is simple, eminently 'practicable'. All occupied farms should become state farms. The Ministry of Agriculture will eventually pay the wages. A state trust will be set up to buy the produce, provide the lorries, look after problems of distribution. The workers are tempted, but instinctively suspicious. They want to get together with other workers on other farms to discuss things with them, to create cooperatives, to deal directly with the population in the towns. They distrust the parasitic officials, sitting in their offices in far-away Lisbon. But they are desperately in need of money to buy shoes, shirts, soap, string, nails and agricultural implements. The men who work the farm over the hill have a

tractor which isn't being used full-time. Will the Army please instruct them to release it for a while? A joint meeting is arranged to thrash things out. The Institute will try to arrange a bridging loan from the local bank. A lorry will be provided to take the cork into the town. Ad hoc solutions are improvised. The wolf is kept from the door for a short while. The Institute has done a job of first aid. Hope will survive a little longer.

Amid the wasps, an old woman is washing her linen at the fountain. The crickets are chirping. The sky is unbelievably blue.

The Second Congress of Councils

The Second Congress of Revolutionary Councils of Workers, Soldiers and Sailors (CRTSM) was held on August 2 and 3, 1975 in Lisbon's Technological Institute, a vast concrete building at the top of a hill. Posters announcing it (in the best 'socialist-realist' style) had broken out like a rash on the city walls several days beforehand. Once the paste had dried they ripped off easily, to the delight of large contingents of revolutionary tourists in search of souvenirs.

We attended the afternoon session on the second day. At the entrance, a vast display of duplicated literature, distributed free. Posters are on sale, their price escalating rapidly as it becomes obvious that demand will exceed supply.

The foyer is packed with young people. Most look like students and a substantial proportion are not from Portugal – one hears almost as much French and German as Portuguese. Young PRP supporters answer questions. Few relate to work, its problems,

its tyranny, its organisation, its transcendence. Most are about Cuba, or Chile, or the political allegiances of this or that Army commander. The answers stress Portuguese particularism. The Army will be with the people. Otelo (Saraiva de Carvalho) has made friendly noises about the PRP.

We go up a flight of wide stone steps, with impressive columns on either side. The meeting is due to start in a vast hall which has doubtless harboured many a degree-giving ceremony or governmental function. Row upon row of wooden chairs. About 600 people present. The same mixture as before. Very few workers (quite a number had apparently been there the " previous day but had not attended for a second dose). No readily identifiable sailors. Banners on the walls seek nostalgically to recapture the atmosphere – and even the vocabulary – of the Petrograd of 1917: 'Fora com a canalha! Poder a quem trabalha! – Out with the scum! Power to the workers! Long live the Socialist Revolution'. In the haze of cigarette smoke, the leftists dream on: the Technological Institute is SmolnY; the Lisnave shipyards, the Putilov plant.

At the far end of the hall an elevated platform, on which a long table has been erected. Seated behind it, perhaps a dozen comrades, most of them bearded, two of them women. In front of the leaders neat stacks of cyclostyled notes. Slightly to one side of the High Table the television crews with their wires, floodlights and other paraphernalia, busy creating images. The 1970s are here, regardless.

The afternoon session starts about an hour late. Several speeches from the platform, most of them lasting half an hour or more. 'Various analyses', we are told, of the current situation. No interruptions. No laughter. No protests. No cheers. As platform speaker succeeds platform speaker the texts of their 'contributions', already duplicated, are handed out by stewards. Only one speaker elicits any enthusiasm – a soldier in civvies. It transpires he is making a 'critical analysis of a text recently issued by COFCON (the section of the MFA devoted to Internal Security!). Some of the formulations are being challenged in the best tradition of dialectical nit-picking. The legitimacy of that particular fount of revolutionary wisdom is not, however, being questioned.

People quietly drift in and out throughout the proceedings. It is formal, well-behaved, self-disciplined and incredibly dull – an exercise in, 'revolutionary' masochism. It has upon it the hallmark of death – or rather of a verbose still-birth. The corridors outside are plastered with slogans. The revolution is suffocating under the written word. In the gents' toilets, amid the usual graffiti, a wit has scrawled PCP = Joaquim Agostinho (Primeiro Cyclista Portugues).

After 3 hours we drift out. Near the exit we pass a large notice board. On it are listed the workplaces 'represented' at the Congress. It looks impressive: factories of all kinds, transport depots, shipyards, telephone exchanges, hospitals, banks, shops, offices, all the areas in modern society where people are exploited and oppressed. On direct enquiry however – and after our refusal to accept evasive answers – it was admitted

that although members or supporters of the PRP worked in these various places, very few were attending in a delegate capacity. The whole episode left an unpleasant flavour of manipulation.

I doubt we will hear much more of the CRTSM. When the next upsurge develops, it will find different forms and a different content.

The Limits of Self-Management

Guimaraes is a small industrial town, some 40 miles north of Porto. The Sousabreu textile factory there is typical of many in the region, reflecting many of the problems of Portuguese capitalism.

The factory, which makes towels, was occupied on September 14, 1974, after it had been abandoned by its owner. Earlier in the year the boss, who owned another factory in the town, had begun to move out the more modern dyeing equipment under pretext of repairs. He had also removed the lorry.

Thirty three workers (22 women and 11 men) had taken over the factory to preserve their livelihood, and decided to continue production. They had had to learn everything from scratch. They bought the cotton at local wholesale rates and sold directly to shopkeepers, to visitors, to political sympathisers, and even at the gates of local factories. To start with they had sold part of the stocks to pay their own wages. They had received little help from the local textile and metalworkers sections of Intersindical, which were dominated

by the PCP. The Party's support for self-managed units was highly selective. And Sousabreu was not a unit of which the Party approved.

The workers had elected a Committee of seven which met almost daily. There were, also fairly' frequent assemblies grouping everyone in the factory. They all worked 48 hours a week. There had been a sustained attempt at equalising earnings. The average wage was 127 escudos (just over £2) a day. The machine minders earned 190 escudos. The newly taken-on apprentice 70 escudos. The main theme discussed at recent general assemblies had been whether to take on more labour.

The factory consisted of a number of large, fairly dilapidated hangers adjoining one another, in one of which the looms were situated. The machines looked at least thirty years old and were noisy and dusty. There were cobwebs, everywhere and little light filtered in. The first task of the socialist revolution would be a sustained attack on capitalist technology. But here there were scarcely funds enough for wages, let alone for modernising the plant.

In the adjoining rooms women were checking the towels, folding them, packing them in plastic cases. The room was brighter and they spoke to one another. I approached a woman in her forties who had worked there for 15 years. What was now different? 'For one', she said, 'there are no longer foremen breathing down your neck. There used to be 3 foremen in this room alone.. We now decide the pace of our own work, and no

longer live in fear of displeasing someone. We run the place ourselves. If I want to go 'shopping one afternoon, or if one of the children is ill, we can consult together and have a little time off, without loss of earnings. No one takes advantage. We know that our collective livelihood depends on producing a certain number of towels each month'.

Adversity had bred a firm solidarity. When earnings were low, the most needy had, been provided for first. Everyone seemed aware. Of the others' problems. Recently things had not been too bad. This year, for the first time ever, they had enjoyed a fortnight's holiday with pay.

Their main complaints were about the way people deformed the meaning of what they were doing. Their wall posters showed an intense awareness of their own condition. There can be few factories in the world plastered with excerpts from Marx's 'Philosophical Manuscripts'. They knew well enough that they were still wage slaves, that what was being self-managed was their own alienation. They worked harder now than they did before. But they had gained a confidence in themselves that they had not felt previously. They had held 'round table' discussions with representatives of other self-managed factories to establish links and to exchange both experiences and products. They had even bartered shirts for towels, one of them told us with a twinkle in his eye. They had discovered a great deal about the functioning of capitalist society which would be of use to them, 'When the real time came'. They had also learned very quickly about the trade unions, which had refused to help them or had only damned

them with faint praise. Above all, they had learned a lot about themselves.

Reaping the harvest

The PCP headquarters in Famalicao, north of Porto, lie shattered. Before April 1974 it was widely believed by those in power that literacy bred subversion. There was only one place in the town where the wealthy could obtain secondary education: an expensive private school, solidly built and set behind a row of tall trees.

With the collapse of the Caetano regime the building had been taken over by the local PCP cell. I couldn't help thinking what an ideal Stalinist redoubt it made, separated by its high walls, from the bustle of the multitude, set on higher ground, its impressive drive redolent with respectability. From here the Party had carried out its manipulations of local government, of trade union branches, of cooperatives, of the granting of agricultural credit. The reaction had been handed things on a plate.[1](#)

After an open air meeting, early in August, a crowd protesting against the unrepresentative nature of several local bodies had set siege to the school and tried to burn it down. Party militants had fired from the upper windows, injuring two demonstrators. The MFA had arrived on the scene to 'restore order' (their fire had killed two more demonstrators).

MFA interventions in such episodes had, we were told, been interesting to watch. At times the soldiers would threaten the crowd with their weapons, turning their backs on the besieged

stalinists. On other occasions they would turn their backs to the crowd, confronting the Party members with their guns. Attitudes had varied from locality to locality, regiment to regiment, moment to moment,. At Famalicao the soldiers had faced the crowd, seeking to restrain it. After a siege of 48 hours the local Party stalwarts had been ordered by Party Headquarters in Lisbon to evacuate the premise. The Army had then left almost immediately. During the whole siege there had been no sign of working class support in the town, not even a token strike. The institutions controlled by the Party apparatus were empty shells. The Party had no roots in real life.

Popular anger had then erupted. The place looked as if it had been hit by a tornado. An overturned car, burnt out, lay grotesquely in the road outside. The drive was littered with charred papers, posters, Party cards. A disconsolate leaflet announcing a meeting that was never to take place. In the building itself every window had been broken. Searchlights installed on the upper balcony had been smashed. Not a stick of furniture, not a fitting remained. The place was now unguarded. Visitors were strolling about, looking at the debris. They had to step carefully for the 'victors' had left shit all over the place.

The MRPP (maoists) issued a statement welcoming 'the people's retribution against the social-fascists'. It wasn't however as simple-as that. The red flag had been burned. A Portuguese flag now stuck out provocatively from an attic window. Beneath it, a large inscription proclaimed 'Building to be taken over for refugees from Angola'.

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- [1.](#) The reaction already had an economic and ideological base in the North (based on the structure of land tenure, on the fears of impoverished small farmers of being rendered poorer still, and on systematic propaganda by the Church.