

An Interview with Helena Santos on
Portuguese Culture and Tradition

April, 1989

I interviewed Helena Santos, a Portuguese-American. Helena's mother, father, and sister came to America, where Helena and her brother were born. Helena's mother was born in America, but her family returned to Portugal when she was nine months of age. As an adult, married, and with a daughter, Helena's mother, and her husband decided to come to America to live. Since she was already a U.S. citizen, she came here without her family, established residence and sent for them. This process took nine months, and it was very painful for Helena's mother to be separated from her family during that time. To this day, almost forty years later, she has tears in her eyes when she speaks of this.

Names are very important to Portuguese people. When Helena meets someone with a Portuguese name, she feels a connection to that person, and she has the liberty to introduce herself. She then gives the other person the freedom to decide whether or not they want to pursue the conversation.

When Helena was sixteen, she decided to Americanize her Portuguese name, Helena. In the Portuguese pronunciation of her name, the h in Helena is silent and most Americans mispronounced it. Helena decided to drop the a at the end of her name, making it Helen. When she wrote her new name on her application for a driver's licence, her father refused to sign it. He felt his daughter was rejecting her Portuguese heritage. As an adult, Helena decided not to change her name, and today she is grateful for her father's concern. They have discussed this at length

through the years, and both have come to understand the other's feelings regarding this issue. Helena explained, this was her way of trying to assimilate into American culture, since it is difficult for a child to function in one culture at home, and in another culture outside the home.

Portuguese people place the family at the top of their priority list. Helena explained, "parents and children are forever". When young adults marry, they do not leave the family of origin, but bring their new spouse back into their family with them. (This is not meant physically, but emotionally.) In a Portuguese family, it is very difficult for young adults to gain autonomy, since family ties are very strong and there is a strong patriarchal influence. Growing up, children are not encouraged to express their feelings, creating a communication barrier within the family unit. The father is not approachable to children, and the mother becomes the liaison.

Grandparents hold a very special place in the hearts of their grandchildren. Helena's grandfather lived in Portugal and she had only met him once when she took her husband to meet him. Because of their age, grandparents are considered wise and held in high esteem. Grandparents feel since they are the oldest members of the family, they have a license and an obligation to counsel their grandchildren. Conversely, the grandchildren are expected to listen to and accept their words of wisdom.

In a portuguese family siblings feel a strong bond with one another. They disagree like all siblings, but they have strong

ties with each other. Helena and her sister are expected, by their mother, to keep her informed about their brother's girlfriends. Neither one of them feels comfortable doing this, and refrain as much as possible from complying. Portuguese custom does not sanction young adults to bring home casual dates, therefore, the parents might never meet this girl. It is also not customary for the mother to directly ask the son about his dates. Helena brought her future husband home after one month, and her parents considered this too soon.

God holds the very high place in the traditional Portuguese family, and most Portuguese are of the Roman Catholic faith. For Helena, however, religion does not hold the importance that had been customary in Portuguese tradition. She has developed a more liberated view of life and her thinking is more autonomous.

Helena is aware of her ethnicity every day, and it is part of her identity. It affects how she thinks, communicates with, and treats people. Her values are also derived from her culture. She prefers shopping in Portuguese markets, eating in Portuguese restaurants, and cooking Portuguese food. I asked her in what situations she would prefer to interact with someone who understood her culture. She said she is bicultural and bilingual, therefore, in most situations it is not a significant concern to her. However, if she had a child, she would definitely want someone of her culture for daycare, and would want the child to be bilingual.

Helena has been to Portugal five times in her adult life.

She studied there in 1975, during the revolution, which was peaceful, and with much singing. People sang everywhere. She felt funny at first, but quickly became comfortable and enjoyed singing in public. The Portuguese are music loving people. When she returns to her Portugal, Helena said, she feels like she belongs there. She feels a part of her is "unnurtured", and by returning to Portugal, this "unnurtured" part of her, is filled.

The Portuguese are very hospitable and generous. If you are a guest in their homes, you are quickly offered food and drink. In Portugal, a family will take food with them when they travel, and will always share their food with those they are with, even strangers.

Traditionally, the Portuguese have lived by farming and fishing. In this country, immigrants will often have a garden or raise small farm animals. They are very self-sufficient and do not like being dependent on others. If through illness, they become unable to provide for themselves, they suffer much psychological distress.

I was struck by the contrast between Helena's culture and my own. In the Portuguese tradition, closeness and dependency of the family is valued. In my family of third generation Irish, and we are not very close. Independence and autonomy is strived for, with little emphasis on custom or tradition, except in the area of religion. Everyone is expected to become Roman Catholic. Each generation removed from the original immigrants (in my family, my grandparents and great grandparents), deviates from

tradition and custom. I feel perhaps our family once had many traditions and values that have been disregarded in the process of becoming Americanized.

According to Erikson(1968,p.22), The final stage of human development involves coming to terms with one's cultural identity:" For only an identity safely anchored in the patrimony of a cultural identity can produce a workable psychosocial equilibrium." (Encyclopedia of Social Work, 1987, p.514)

Work Cited

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