

LEATHER: THE END OF THE ROAD?

Franklin Pereira

A few weeks ago I went to the very inside edge of northern Portugal, a corner having Spain to the north and east; it's a forgotten region, slowly losing population: the province has 300,000 inhabitants for 63,500 square km. I lived near the Spanish border until I was 9 years old.

The main objective was to have a look at the leather trade, starting with the removal of the skin. In the early 16th century many Jewish families moved from the main cities to the interior of the country, trying to avoid the king's rules to have them turn into Christians or else face expulsion from Portugal. Their culture/practices and rites became hidden from outsiders and the men kept strictly to their work and business.

Leather tanning was one of the activities, and the village of Argozelo had several tanyards with pits and a horse mill to grind sumac. Together with other products of the land, sumac was part of the farmers' economy; it was dried in stone yards before being sold. There were special farms, called 'sumacais', for sumac, which doesn't need much human care. Around spring, the soft branches were collected, dried and sold. Not only Argozelo, but also the villages of Sendim, Lagoaça and others provided dried sumac for the tanners. Much of it was sent to other cities. Early 16th century documents state it was sold, not by weight, but by the donkey load. There are reports, dating from the early 17th century, about the sending of sumac by boat up to the Atlantic city of Oporto, from where ships took it to Hamburg and nearby ports, in exchange for the famous Russia leather.

The many flocks meant plenty of available goat and sheep skins. A few men went from village to village on horseback, collecting the already dried skins. I came to know an old retired skin-collector, - called 'peliteiro' or 'peliqueiro' in Portuguese - who, since his youth, had collected hundreds of hairy skins. Now he's more than 80 years old and he told me old stories of his life. The province is called 'Tras-os-Montes', literally 'behind the hills', thus making clear its isolation. It has very hot summers (it's possible to fry sardines on the railway tracks!) and snowy winters. The skin-collector, also of a Jewish family, told me that skins are nowadays collected in open cars and go to the main tanning centre in Portugal, located some 100 km north of Lisbon. The couple of times I visited him there were several skins drying in a big garage. The sheep skins were cut and flattened-out, while goat skins are taken off without being cut. This took me into other stories.

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the others have crumbled down and are full of debris. Another tanner showed me few drying skins, waiting for the collector's car; outside his house his wife was knitting woollen socks, with wool also spun by her. A pair of high-heeled socks cost a couple of pounds. Once in a while another former tanner makes a harness for a donkey, but the greasy cowhide comes from the shop in the nearby city. I was shown a pair of miner's boots: wooden soles, with the leather nailed around, forming the boot itself up to the mid-leg. A very old woman, dressed in black, with the hands and face of a wrinkled sculpture, took me along with the cows to a nearby field. Along the stone walls dividing grass fields sumac was growing freely. Nobody collects it.

In the village of Lagoaça, where I arrived on a walking tour, I met two former shepherds. Like the other inhabitants, they were sitting in the central square, under the trees, chatting as the late afternoon was refreshing the hot summer-day. It's always very easy to start a conversation leading to the subject I want. One still keeps a shoulder bag made from a complete goat skin. A few stitches were needed to close it at the bottom and a few others to hold the shoulder strap in place. The bag was used to take his lunch - bread with cheese or ham (all wrapped in linen cloth) and a bottle of wine - while roaming with the sheep. Such a bag is called 'surrão' or 'zurrão', terms that were also used in 16th century theatrical plays. While we were talking and laughing, there came another old man. He invited me to taste his wine in a nearby house, and wanted to offer me a 5 litre wine jug. It was late Saturday afternoon and he had arrived back from Lisbon, where he works in a petrol station, at 3.00 am. He usually gets a bus at 7.00 pm after work on Fridays, works in his farm and vinyard on Saturdays and Sundays, and leaves on Sunday after lunch, arriving in Lisbon after midnight. Quite an amazing energy, and a longing for 'the land', an expression that in Portugal connects one to one's birthplace, the village of early times.

In spite of being remote and forgotten in past decades, these and other villages belonged to an economic circuit, where farms, cattle and the leather trade played a big part. Nowadays, in spite of easier road access, electricity and TV, the villages are getting depopulated; the country crafts are mostly gone due to irrelevance, and the old survivors live off low retirement pensions of £100 or similar. Will it all be the end of the road?

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Until the late 1960s - a date that marks the quick extinction of Argozelo tanneries - the goat skins had their hair removed and were then stitched at the bottom end, the neck providing the entry for the tanning liquid. These 'bags' remained in the pits for several weeks. Many were turned into wineskins (big ones with a capacity of 75 litres). The wool plucked from the skins is still sold, but its price is coming down drastically. He also spoke about the use of dog's dung to add to the tanning recipe - the centuries-old way to yield soft hides and skins. When I lived near the Spanish border as a boy, my father gave me a little white lamb; the "puppy" cost, almost 40 years ago, less than 10p. Around the house where I lived there was plenty of grass for the lamb, and it soon turned into a domestic animal, behaving like a dog to play with. When I had to leave the province at 9 years old, the adult sheep was sold without my knowledge; most probably its skin was sold to the skin-collector or his relatives.

Another product he collected was worth gold in the poor farmers' economy. It was a dark long grain usually found amidst normal rye grains; an ear of rye only had 2 or 3 grains of this particular dark one called 'cronelho'. Obviously it took plenty of rye spikes to get one kg. of the dark long grain; one kg. was worth £1.50. At the skin-collector's garage, there was a full load of such dark long grain. What was it for? It was sold to pharmacies, then to medical labs, to extract penicillin (at least that was the people's belief), but medical developments in the last decades have made this collecting useless.

In the village of Argozelo, things look grey, and this aspect is rather common outside the few main cities (which themselves suffer from chaotic architectural growth). The village, like plenty of others, is crumbling down. The old stone houses lack inhabitants, emigration to France in the early 1960s left mostly old people, farming doesn't pay, and modern development (whatever that is) concentrates itself in the coastal cities. I met a few old folk sitting on stone house stairs, enjoying the warm sun of April with the cats; both tend to be the last to leave the ship. The movement and life of the past - farming days, cattle sales - remain only in the memory.

Isn't memory also part of heritage? My questions led me to three former tanners. One of them acted out the scraping and fleshing of a skin on the half trunk, using a completely rusty double-handle curved knife. Now without its wooden handles, it is the very last tool that survives from the many tools used by the several country factories. The tanner's work was rather hard in winter, as many times there was a film of ice on top of the pits in the early morning. I was taken to a former tanning pit, the last one left. Like the tanning house, all

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