
“TO TAKE THE GOOD THINGS FROM EACH SIDE AND UNIFY THEM”

By Ana Ramalho de Oliveira Faria

Pedro Gregório Lopes was born in 1959 in S. Nicolau, Cape Verde. In 1977, at the age of 18, he went to Leipzig, in the then German Democratic Republic. From 1978 to 1983 he studied Architecture at the Bauhaus University in Weimar. In 1984, having finished his degree, he returned to Cape Verde, accompanied by his wife and son. There he worked for 4 years at the Town Hall of Praia. In 1988 he returned to Germany and worked as an architect in Eisenhüttenstadt till 1990, when he moved to Berlin, where he now lives. Besides being an architect, he paints and plays the piano and the guitar.

The first impression you get of Pedro Lopes is of a well humoured yet efficient person. We met for the first time at Dussmann's on Friedrichstrasse. Ten minutes later, he apologised and assured me that he is usually very punctual. The cliché of German punctuality came immediately to my mind and I wondered just how 'German' this Capeverdean had become. The interview was conducted in a café where he occasionally plays the piano, as he tells me, to entertain the clients and put them in a good mood.

CHILDHOOD IN CAPE VERDE

Pedro Lopes' first 'migration' was somewhat painful: when he was six, his father sent him and his brother for three months to S. Nicolau, to their grandmother's house. "The first time I had to leave, it felt like...And I was still a child. I cried a lot. You get used to it later. It was always a wonderful vacation. Three months in the country."

Back in Praia, on Santiago Island, where he lived with his parents, he grew up listening to stories.

"Our nanny would tell us all these stories. We would spend the whole time sitting on the doorstep listening to stories and more stories. There were lots of made-up stories but also stories that are legends. Have you ever heard of the story of the wolf and the chibinho? No? Wolf and Chibinho. The wolf and the fox. It's the wolf and the chibinho in Cape Verde. Then there were other stories, the story of the white horse, the fairy story...a mixture that developed throughout the years. There was no TV back then, so we had to use our imagination. Which isn't bad, either."

When Pedro Lopes was born, Cape Verde was still a Portuguese colony, subjected to Salazar's fascist regime. It wasn't until 1974, after the April 25th Revolution in Portugal, that Cape Verde became an independent country. Up to that point, it was controlled by Portuguese and policed by the PIDE, the secret police. Pedro Lopes experienced the oppression of the dictatorship, the struggle

for independence, the revolution and, finally, independence as a child and young adolescent.

“I have a lot of memories as a child. One thing I remember very well...we had schools. The school was built like an L. There were two entrances, with stairs to the left and to the right. When I went to school there was still the...the colonial system, where the Portuguese and the whites had to use the left entrance and we, the Capeverdeans, the mulattos, the right entrance. That’s something that really left an impression on me, I could never understand it. Because, to me, people are all equal, regardless of skin color, language and where they’re from. I also remember the 25th April 1974, the transition phase in 74/75, before Cape Verde’s independence, I saw all that as well. It left an impression, it really left an impression on me. I was 16 when Cape Verde became independent, I also felt...There’s this pride, pride in being independent, in having your own country, your own culture.”

At the age of 18, he decided to go to Germany to study Architecture. His interest in architecture had developed at an early age: “By the time I was nine I had already taken my first photograph of my father’s building site”. His father is an architect, as well, yet he did not try to influence his son to study Architecture.

“My father didn’t want to help me with my studies, with my degree in Architecture, I mean, in other words, he didn’t want me to make the same mistakes he had made. He let me make the decision to be an architect on my own. Why I came to Germany is a very interesting story. I had an uncle, or I still have an uncle, who’s a writer, his name is Luis Romano. He now lives in Rio de Janeiro, in Brazil. On one of his visits (I was about 15 years old, if I’m

not mistaken, so around 1975, 76) he said that if one day I had the chance to go to university, that I should try to study in Germany. The illustrious names, the vast culture, the vast knowledge...Germany would be the ideal place for me to study. In fact, in 1977 I was one of the three best students. I had the right to choose, I had two scholarships, I could have gone to Brazil, to Rio de Janeiro and I had another scholarship for Germany. So I decided, and I really don't regret it, to come to Germany."

FROM SANTIAGO TO LEIPZIG

"Well... I left Cape Verde on the 12th October 1977. I flew via Lisbon and stopped there for one night. At that time there were no direct flights to East Berlin, so it was an adventure, it was unbelievable. It took me three days to get from Cape Verde to East Berlin. I arrived in Frankfurt, I didn't have a visa, so I was caught by the police. But, since I was a student, I had this document that proved that I was going to study in the GDR. I spent another night in Frankfurt, in the airport, went somehow to Vienna, and from Vienna finally came to East Berlin. So I arrived in East Berlin on the 15th October at 1:20 in the morning. And when I arrived...I left Cape Verde in October, it was around 32 °. I arrived in Berlin at 1:20 in the morning, it was, what, 3 or 4°. So it was extraordinary. When I arrived, I didn't have a visa, I only had this piece of paper from a cousin of mine that had studied here in Berlin, which had the name and telephone number of a colleague of mine that lived and studied in Berlin. It was all in German, I didn't understand a word of German, I gave it to the policeman. They called him, he came to me, but in the meantime I was locked up for three or four hours in the transit room. I couldn't just arrive and walk in. My first impression when I arrived in Germany...It was like I was a person

who...I had come to study, but I still wasn't welcome, because I didn't have a visa, and I couldn't come in just like that.

The first days weren't that easy. My colleague, his name was Luis Martins, picked me up from Berlin Schönefeld at three o'clock in the morning. Then he took me to Fischerinsel, to a Brazilian girl's apartment. She was a communist, who lived in Berlin at that time. I stayed for a week in that apartment, without a visa, without anything, until another person, another friend came. He studied in Leipzig, he went with me from Berlin to Leipzig. It was the first time I was on a train."

About Germany and the Germans Pedro Lopes knew only what he had seen in films as a child: war films, where Germans were always portrayed as Nazis. "Of course, you were a bit afraid, a bit afraid of Germans." But what really worried him when he arrived, besides the cold, was the difference in height.

"I came from Frankfurt am Main via Vienna to East Berlin. I boarded the plane and only saw very tall Germans...I went, "damn, what am I going to do now, I mean, I'm going to stay here for 6 years, the women are all tall, I'm as short as nothing"...but in all countries there are big people and little people."

In Leipzig he spent one year learning German at the Herder Institute. German sounded harsh and difficult at first, but thanks to the rigorous German winter, he caught pneumonia and had to spend two and a half months in a clinic, which turned out to be an excellent opportunity to learn German.

"I learned German with ease...I started studying, there was a very intensive schoolbook. It had 50 lessons, of which I learned 25 [at school]

because in mid-November I had to go to a clinic. I didn't fail the year though. Since it was so far away, my colleagues wouldn't come to visit me at the clinic. I had to learn German by force. I learned the rest of the 25 lessons on my own. Then I met a nurse who helped me. I would write and she would read it all and correct it; there were mistakes on top of mistakes on top of mistakes. But one thing was good: I lost my fear of speaking German. When I left the clinic, I took the exams in the middle of the course and got a 3 in everything, right in the middle, as if nothing had happened. The teacher even said something very interesting: how is it possible that, having only learned 25 lessons, you do the other 25 alone, leave, come back, and start talking like that. I said, well, the best school there is is being in the hospital and having no visitors, and being forced to learn how to speak. That's how I learned German."

On the 30th May 1980, he met his future wife in Weimar. "She has black hair, she doesn't look very German, they say she even looks more Portuguese. Well, when I saw her, I said, well, that's her and that's that. And that's how it was." Their first son was born on January 13th 1982. In 1983 Pedro Lopes finished his degree at the Bauhaus University and returned, along with his wife and son, to Praia, in Cape Verde.

FROM WEIMAR TO PRAIA

Pedro Lopes started his professional life in Praia, more precisely in the Town Hall of Praia. Both his wife and son had no problems adapting to the island's lifestyle. They learned Crioulo, their son went to kindergarten. Five years later however, they decided to return to Germany. Their son was then old enough to go to school, and they believed that he could get a better education

in Germany. “It wasn’t easy for me,” explains Pedro Lopes, “I had already started. I started at the age of 30 almost from zero. But I never regretted it.”

BACK TO THE GDR

This time he settled down in Eisenhüttenstadt, where he worked as an architect. On the 18th of October his daughter was born. The year is now 1988, shortly before the wall came down and the GDR came to an end. Observing the situation as a foreigner, Pedro Lopes noticed the signs of change.

“It was a very strange feeling. I started to feel all those political changes. I saw all the changes, the demonstrations, etc. But one thing I never understood: I had access, I could go to West Berlin whenever I wanted to, go shopping, come back...I never understood why the regime at that time wouldn’t let the people out, afraid that they would stay there. For me, the opening of the Wall, the fact that the Wall came down exactly on my wife’s 30th birthday, on the 9th of November, for me, it’s a very historical date. I always remember it now when it’s my wife’s birthday. And it was a very very good feeling...”

When the Wall came down?

“When the Wall came down. To see the people, that great freedom of expression, of thought. For me it was something extraordinary. At the time, I was in Eisenhüttenstadt. My wife had her birthday on the 9th. The Wall came down. On the 12th she went to West Berlin like everyone else. I didn’t need to go because I’d already seen it. But it was a strange feeling. But very very

interesting. I also saw it on TV, I heard it on the radio, I followed everything closely. It was a very illustrious feeling.”

Could you understand why the people were so happy?

“I could understand that, I could understand that because I was educated and lived in the GDR during that time. The oppression though, the fact that the people couldn’t leave, couldn’t say what they thought, and also the difference between the ruling caste, I mean, between the regime and the people, that is something I could never understand.”

“OSSIS” AND “WESSIS”

After the euphoria that followed the fall of the Berlin Wall, the first years of reunification were characterised by conflicts between citizens of West and East Germany. After almost thirty years of separation, clichés and prejudices had been created which were now making coexistence difficult. Having lived and been educated in East Germany, Pedro Lopes became aware of the low opinion that not only West Germans but also colleagues from Cape Verde had of the socialist countries.

“In 1990, after the Wall came down, I worked for two, three months in West Berlin. I started working as a building site inspector and I came to work with West Germans, “Wessis”, who thought that the eastern mentality was worthless. And someone who had been educated in East Germany wasn’t able to give the same response as the others. For at least ten years...no, not ten years, let’s say, 95/96. Till 96/97, for almost seven years, there was that

mentality. And, in the end, they make tea with water as well. That's it. As the Germans say, 'Sie kochen auch mit Wasser'. So I experienced that personally. I thought it was a very unfair attitude. It wasn't correct. I had had the same problem already in Cape Verde. Because I had studied in the GDR, I had other colleagues that had studied in Brazil, in the United States, in France and so on. Their education wasn't better than mine. I never regretted having studied in East Germany.

And what did the "Ossis" think about the "Wessis"?

"Arrogant. Arrogant. I can confirm that because they had a way of being, of thinking that was as if they knew everything...but I experienced that myself. I can tell you how you can overcome something like that. Arrogance can only be beaten when you have abilities. You have to show them. And not with words but with actions. And that's what I did. And it's what I do today, actually."

"LITTLE BOXES IN MY HEAD"

"When I'm here in Germany I dream, live, think, speak in German. When I'm in Portugal I think, speak, live in Portuguese and when I'm in Cape Verde, in both languages [Portuguese and Crioulo]. I can do it as if I had little boxes in my head. But it's no problem for me to translate or think in German, to talk in Crioulo, in Portuguese, and so on."

Pedro Lopes grew up speaking Crioulo and Portuguese, which today is still the official language of Cape Verde. He has lived, in all, for 21 years in

Germany, travelling often to Cape Verde and Portugal. The interview is conducted in Portuguese, but he answers me frequently with *Ja*, sometimes with *na ja* or *das heisst*. He considers Crioulo to be his mother tongue. But he tells me, laughing, that the language in which he can best express himself is not Crioulo but Portuguese.

“Unfortunately, but I was very lucky, my mother is Portuguese, my father studied in Portugal, too, so that we only spoke Portuguese at home. Between brothers and sisters, Crioulo, of course, and outside, too, but with our parents, always Portuguese. I can also express myself in Crioulo without problems. But to express myself well, I have to speak Portuguese, I can’t do it in another language. Portuguese and German, of course. I can also express myself very well in German.”

And are there differences between the languages?

“German is the most precise language I know. Portuguese is also a very beautiful language...The Germans have for every meaning only one word. While Portuguese and Crioulo and other languages have many kinds of...you can say one thing and mean another. When a German says something, that is exactly what he means, while with Portuguese and Crioulo, things are very ambiguous, I mean, they’re not very precise languages.”

PUNCTUAL VS. HAPPY

And do the differences between languages correspond to differences between peoples? I mention the stereotype of the cold, dull German and the warm-hearted, happy Capeverdean. Is there any truth in it at all?

“Those aren’t stereotypes, that is very true. I mean, you can’t say that all Germans are like that or that all Capeverdeans are like that. But, generally, I think that the Germans are...not cold, you have to explain it in another way. Germans doesn’t like to, aren’t capable of expressing the happiness they feel inside, while Capeverdeans or the Portuguese have that tendency. We laugh loudly, we talk loudly. The Germans talk very restrainedly, they think twice before saying anything, it’s another way of being in the world. Actually, in that respect, I’ve been living between two worlds, for I’m always going to Cape Verde. I always have the feeling, that when I’m in Cape Verde people are more open, happier in their poverty, kinder, whereas Germans are more reserved. To get a German to laugh, as they say, it’s possible, but it’s very difficult. You have to, as they say, melt the ice. Otherwise it won’t work.

And then there’s one thing that the Germans value very highly, which is punctuality, which is how you organize your work, how you respond to your work, something that when I compare it with my colleagues in Cape Verde is almost impossible. I mean, in Cape Verde, or in other countries in the South, punctuality is something almost unbelievable. People are not able to start something on time and well. Another thing: the German's capacity to organize is something phenomenal, it seems as if from all the countries in the world the Germans are the ones who can organize things best, can plan and execute, while in other countries, even in Cape Verde, it’s very difficult for people to think, organize, prepare and execute. They start doing it the other way around: they start executing before they prepare. That’s the fundamental difference

between how we live and work in Cape Verde and how we live and work in Germany.”

“Germans are also direct. One thing I learned...A lot of times when I work in Cape Verde people start talking, they use all sorts of roundabout ways to get to the point. I don't like that so much either. I say, “Alright, what do you want?”. Straight to the point. And that's it. That's a way of the Germans that I love, I really love. Germans don't have...they say things that they think. Often it sounds harsh, it sounds offensive, but deep deep down it's a way of being. Things are then clear and well explained. And often German sounds harsh because the word, the German way of talking is in itself very dry.”

“TAKE ADVANTAGE OF BOTH THINGS”

When he arrived in Germany, in 1977, Pedro Lopes made an effort to fit in. He took part in groups and in various projects. Today he feels part of society. He has a private architectural office, he has received several awards. He is married to a German woman, his children “are German”, his friends are German. He can speak the language. But he always refers to the Germans in the third person. His admiration for German organization, punctuality, frankness – hasn't he himself become a little bit German?

“I was always like that. I was always punctual. I always had a way of organizing...Also a story I'd like to tell: when I was eleven, I had a girlfriend. Then I had bad grades at school. So my father grounded me for three days. He really grounded me, I couldn't leave the house for three days. So I said, alright, I'm going to show who's who. I started preparing, I divided [my time] in such

a way...I had time to play the piano, to go out, to be with my girlfriend, I had time for school. So that they said that my day didn't have 24 hours, but my day had 28 hours. Afterwards, here in Germany, that was perfected. Lots of people say, when they meet me, that I'm more German than a German. But it's the way of being. I feel well in both cultures. I feel well in both realities. But I'll never deny that I'm purely Capeverdean. If there's one thing I'll never let the Germans take from me, or become German, it's my temperament, my way of being, of saying things, of being happy, of expressing things. You have to try to be between two worlds, take the good things from each side and bring them together, unify them. Then it's much richer, that's much much richer. My vision of the world is much larger. Your horizons become much vaster. You can see things from both sides. Many times when I'm here I think that if I think like a Capeverdean – ah, calm down, things will be okay... - while in Cape Verde, no, lots of things...the German system comes. It's like that. You try to take advantage of both things. As best you can.”

He doesn't think of himself as belonging to any country, neither to Germany nor to Cape Verde. He considers his motherland to be Cape Verde; however, motherland to him means origin, roots: it is a starting point.

“I don't feel like a Capeverdean citizen or like a German citizen. Even regarding my passport. I feel like a citizen of the world. So I could be here, I could be in Brazil, I could be in China, and so on.”

But it's important for you to feel your roots.

“It's very important, and that's what I said a moment ago, you shouldn't deny your roots. I mean, even being in China, even being in Brazil, that thing,

the Capeverdean culture, the Capeverdean roots, will never disappear. I can only enrich it. Like centuries ago, with the slaves that came from Africa, went through Cap Verde, there was that miscegenation with the Portuguese, then they went to America...It's the same thing, it's the same thing right now. On a personal level. You catch things and enrich yourself. Like in a laboratory."

MUSIC + ART + ARCHITECTURE

To take the best from each side, unify it, and create something new is something Pedro Lopes does in other areas of his life as well. Besides being an architect, Pedro Lopes plays the piano and the guitar and paints. His musical preferences erase borders once more: "I play everything, I play everything. I play Capeverdean music, Portuguese music, French music, German music, American music, jazz, Brazilian music...there's a mixture of music, of cultures."

Architecture, music and painting unite as well, complementing each other.

"Architecture without art, without music, and music without architecture, without art, makes no sense. For me, the three things interconnect. I feel good when I see that, when I draw, lots of things from architecture that I do pass into my drawings, and the other way around, too. And through music, when I do my projects, when I conceive projects. Music with the counterforts, with the highs and lows, with rhythm, and all those things, is a great part of my life."

THE FUTURE

Pedro Lopes is happy with his life. He feels happy in Berlin, he loves his job, he is at peace with himself. You can see his pride in all that he has achieved in his life: a scholarship to study in Germany, to overcome cultural and linguistic barriers and fit into German society, finishing his degree successfully, to establish his own office in Berlin, having started again almost from scratch. All this thanks to his persistence and energy. He is proud of his Capeverdean roots, of his happy, open disposition, but also of his ability to work and organize. His plans for the future are the reflection of his life:

“There’s a third part of life, which will certainly be half a year here, half a year there. Later, when the children move out. It’s not wanting to go back, it’s living between two worlds. Which is much easier. I don’t think there’ll be any problems there.”