

“Festas do Povo”, Campo Maior

26th August through 3rd September 2000

Poured into place as if by a sensitive hand between the infinite brown of the countryside and the other fields in the North of the Alentejo region, it shimmers delicately in the blazing summer: the Campo Maior. And when the heat abates, when the month of August approaches its final days, life awakes to a new spring in this town close to the Spanish border, with its 12,000 inhabitants. It may last for only for one week, but it brings forth an unbelievable wealth of colors and shapes. A spring season called “Festas do Povo” that immerses the entire town in a sea of festoons, flowers and fruits. A rebirth of spring that disregards the fixed order of the seasons, since it is hand-made through and through, by people, out of paper and in millions of hours of work.





Chickpeas are Fátima's secret. They make the base of the blossoms stand out in three dimensions, they form a firm center for ten layers of paper, which, when appropriately shaped, make up the true masterpiece: A flower which is an absolute replica of the original, and this not only at first glance.

Fátima, assisted by Eduarda and Maria, will have completed around 30,000 of these flowers by the end of August, when the "Festas do Povo" are celebrated in Campo Maior: Roses, larkspur, bougainvillea, geraniums, orchids and many other plants are made by skilled slitting and cutting to shape, overlapping and slight curling of the delicate paper between forefinger and thumb – or through little tricks like wrapping a chickpea.

Since December the women have been working with untiring eagerness, night after night, seldom stopping before two o'clock in the morning. And this has not only been going on in Fátima's house. Up to 6,000 inhabitants of this town in the Alentejo region have been occupied with preparations for a festival that is unparalleled anywhere in the world.

During the "Festas do Povo" the blue sky above the streets will disappear – because the sky will then be made of paper, consisting of up to 50 million flowers and festoons in all the colors of the rainbow. Flower pots, arbors, lanterns, fences or pools of cardboard are arranged in the streets like trees and bushes, in the branches of which you hear the rustling of millions of green leaves, cut to match the last detail of the originals.

It is mainly the elderly women in town who have mastered this art of hand-made illusion, passing on their knowledge and skills to the younger generation. Nevertheless, the Festas and the preparations for this event are everyone's project: *"This makes us grow into a single large community, where all the doors are open."* What Eduarda describes in such simple words has been described by the press an "example of collective illusion", of "living equality" and as "a place where the people make the rules."

It is not only an abundance of colored paper that creates the fascination of the "Festas do Povo" but also this almost unique solidarity demonstrated by the 12,000 citizens when organizing their "Festival of the People". The festival is not scheduled to be held at regular inter-



vals, but only after a joint resolution that the time has come. From the moment the decision has been made, direct cooperation awakens to life and the planning, but also the secrets, begin.

Directed by a “leader” and taking into account all the ideas that the residents have submitted, every street designs its individual decoration, its share of the overall masterpiece, and keeps it under lock and key up to the very last moment. The men of Campo Maior are mainly in charge of the manual tasks such as attaching fastenings and illuminations to the buildings; it is the women who, in a total of three million hours of work, process about three million sheets of tissue and 60,000 sheets of crepe paper. The complete material was imported from the Werola company of Rastatt, Germany,

weighing, including 5,000 kg of cardboard, a total of 28 tons. Enough material to decorate a area of 110,000 square meters.

Visitors arriving in Campo Maior as late as the eve of the festival will be disappointed when exploring the town’s deserted streets. There isn’t the slightest clue that a few hours later one of the country’s most fascinating shows will take place. But as night falls, the doors open and gigantic rolls of festoons and baskets full of flowers are carried out of the houses. Quietly but without losing a second, the teams put up the festoons from house to house and drape them with flowers, fruits and ornaments. It is four, five or perhaps even six o’clock in the morning before all the decorations are in place. A joint meal is followed by an im-

portant ceremony: “em arruda”. Walking arm in arm and singing, the paper artists wander through the 112 transformed streets of the town, survey the lavish creations, take in this collective work of art. Before they go to bed and dream of nothing but flowers, they will pray: that Campo Maior will be spared from the rain for one week. But in the event of these prayers remaining unanswered, they won’t admit defeat: in a final display of collective determination they take off the flowers and festoons, dry them, hang them up again and continue to celebrate.

Amazing solidarity and the will to start all over again if necessary has characterized the inhabitants of this Spanish-Portuguese border town for many centuries. Conquered by the Moors, seized by the Spaniards around 1230, occupied by the

Portuguese in 1296, Campo Maior and its fortress was originally a symbol for “facing the Spanish enemy defiantly”. It reverted finally to the Portuguese crown in 1297. In the following centuries fierce fighting along the border flared up again and again. But just as often the courageous citizens were able to escape capture and even succeeded in defying Napoleon’s soldiers. This heritage earned them the official title “loyal and brave” in the year 1811. At that time, with their usual toughness, the people of Campo Maior had also survived prolonged epidemics and the consequences of a gigantic explosion.

As a result of the detonation of the municipal gunpowder magazine during a thunderstorm in 1732, two thirds of the roughly 1,100 houses making up the town at that time were destroyed and hundreds of people killed.

Peace has long since returned to Campo Maior. Today its inhabitants make their living from agriculture and a thriving coffee roasting industry. The latter also supplies us with the most popular of the numerous theories about the Festas do Povo’s origin: They are an extension of smaller, spontaneous celebrations commemorating the successful outcome of coffee-smuggling tours to Spain! Another theory sees the stimulus for the Festas in the worship of John the Baptist. It is certainly true that so far a procession has been organized in his honor as part of every “festival of the people”.

However, nobody cares much any longer about the precise origin of the feasts, which were organized for the first time on





a grand scale in 1893. The pleasure of creativity, of producing wonderful things, is what predominates: *“Preparing the festival is great fun, and the results are truly fantastic!”* says Eduarda with great enthusiasm, and Maria, shaping pink flowers with her usual tireless enthusiasm and placing them in a large box beside her, adds: *“The Festas are there to make life more beautiful. Thousands of people work hand in hand for a great idea!”* She recalls the tears in the eyes of the women of this town, when at the end of the “Festas” a huge fire is kindled and the entire splendor, the result of many months of tired, sleepless nights, is wiped out in a matter of minutes.

For Fátima, who has experienced as many as twenty “Festas do Povo”, it is the power of the group that counts: *“Ownership is in abeyance. Everybody is free to go wherever he or she likes. Anyone who enters the house, owns it! The bigger the family, the greater the festival!”*

Such words may evoke spontaneous ifs and buts in those who do not understand the philosophy of the “Festas do Povo” – or are incapable of understanding it. This is because they have never participated in such living solidarity, which after all the designing, creating and decorating work is over is still far from having reached its peak. When the blazing midday heat abates, large tables are placed in front of the houses, the proud artists sit down at the tables in their streets, enjoy the admiration of the visitors, explain and tell stories. On the table there is bread, water and all kinds of food ready for anyone who needs a rest, who wishes to experience the town’s awakening. People eat,

Our thanks are due to Gustavo de Almeida Rebeiro, Lisbon, for kindly granting permission to reproduce some pictures from the book "Campo Maior – a magia do povo", of which he is the author and publisher.

Also, we would like to thank to the organizers of the "Festas do Povo" and the photographer Mr. Otto Hahn for additional pictures and supplemental informations.



talk and dance on several squares, and you can hear the sounds of the "Saias", songs about Campo Maior, its past and its future. Traditional songs, written in verse and composed during the long nights of the preparation period.

"When someone approaches you and invites you, don't be surprised – simply accept the invitation!" declares Maria, because hospitality and openness towards other people is part of Campo Maior's principle of life. However, for some years practicing the "tradition of the poor houses" has been almost impossible. This is because every festival attracts an increasing number of visitors to the little town north of Elvas. Those visitors not only stretch the residents' most generous hospitality to the limit, they need – since they arrive in up to 50,000 cars and 2,000 coaches – to be well organized down to the smallest detail. A 150-hectare parking lot has been provided, and hard-working catering booths do their very best to feed the tourists. Apart from a small parking fee, the splendid spectacle itself is still free of charge,

regardless of the fact that the costs of the material alone amount to about 150,000 dollars for every festival. They are borne by the municipality and, in part, by private sponsors.

Accepting money from the tourists would contradict the basic principle anchored in all this commitment. But the exception proves the rule: Voices have already been raised calling for better marketing of the whole event, and the residents of various streets have threatened not to participate in the Festas.

The tissue paper rustles softly as Fátima shows the other two women how to create tiny red buds. Eduarda and Maria are among those, who have the skill and determination needed to pass on the tradition. It has of course come to Fátima's

ears that some of the younger citizens foresee a profitable business in the Festas. But she does not believe that the Festas are threatened, not in the near future: It is the beautiful things that count, the masterpiece as a whole. There is a power for body and soul, anchored in this unique achievement. One gives to it, and one is rewarded in return.

Even though she only knows the latest flower and festoon motifs from her immediate neighborhood, Fátima is sure that the "Festas do Povo 2000" will eclipse all previous festivals. Not only to achieve the impossible, but to outperform it again and again, is a wish that the citizens of Campo Maior reveal in another motto: *"Show people heaven – and that you can share your heart!"*

Heidi Hahn

