

# The Provence That's Not in the Guidebooks

Thomas Marion Iiams

**I**n Pampidouian France the government's objective is to make everyone believe that having more is living better, with the result that even the less affluent are purchasing new cars and second homes, and no one, seemingly, is learning how to repair old ones or is concerned about the 11 per cent interest rate on new mortgages. A French jeweler today will not even look at your Timex watch, and the day has already come when the state-run Gaz de France is reluctant to take on any new customers because this could necessitate laying larger pipelines to satisfy increased demand.

And yet. And yet. I question if there is a lovelier place on earth to endure these discomforts than that portion of the Alpes Maritimes within a five-mile radius of Vence-la-Jolie. Tourists looking for the Matisse chapel and the two great fountains with their reputedly therapeutic water catch glimpses of it from their cars; but to get the full flavor of this corner of Provence one must leave the Place du Grand Jardin and enter the Place Clemenceau, crossroads of the Old City. Here is the little cathedral, smallest in all France, and here too is Madame Rena's Bar Central, the social hub and crosscultural matrix of the unfashionable side of town.

Rena, whose parents migrated from the Piedmontese town of Mondovi before World War I, is not from what could be considered *une vieille souche vençoise*. She was born here, but that does not make her a native daughter. Like the aristocratic Boston lady who, when asked where she bought her hats, replied, "one doesn't *buy* one's hats, one *has* them," so one is Vençois or one is not.

Not that these fine social distinctions trouble Rena, whose own cultural ambivalence is a badge she wears proudly, betraying only the slightest bias in the relatively large selection of Italian popular songs

in the Bar Central jukebox, and her peasant Italian taste as reflected in the *stazzioni termini* décor of the upstairs hotel. But it is the café on the corner that is of special interest because it is there, at noon-time or in the early evening hours, that half of M'Saken is to be found.

M'Saken, of course, is not French at all, but Tunisian, and the birthplace, one would judge, of over half the Arab people in Vence. As far as anyone can remember there were always a few Arabs here, and it is ironic to think that some of these have lived in Provence longer than the *pieds noirs* whose fathers or grandfathers emigrated to North Africa hoping to do better in a backward country. Ramadan is observed fairly strictly in Vence, but, except for those weeks when they are fasting, the men generally spend all their free time in the vicinity of the rue du Marché and the avenue de la Résistance. Now there is nothing significant about all of this until one realizes how few Arabs ever enter, let alone drink in, any of the other bars or cafés. Technically they are free to give their business to any bar they choose, but they tend to congregate in two: the Papillon bar on the main street, appreciated because of its free TV, and the Central because of its pinball machine and two tango records.

While other cafés cater to helmeted high-school students and less swarthy European older couples who will, in all likelihood, die here—their caskets passing down the aisle of the unpretentious cathedral directly opposite the Bar Central—Rena knows how much coffee and beer the Arabs consume and how many fifty-centime pieces go into the various "games of skill" available to clients, who are much more likely to die of lung cancer—too many Gauloise cigarettes—than from cirrhosis of the liver brought on by cheap red wine.

It was while on my way to Rena's one night that I overheard a small French boy ask his father, "*C'est quoi, un arabe?*" Presumably he had seen some of

---

THOMAS MARION IAMS is a specialist in Luso-Brazilian history with an interest in resettled populations.

the Tunisian men stand around outside the bar, instinctively aware that they fell into none of the two familiar categories, being neither tourists nor French. I missed the father's answer, but when I got to the bar I asked my friend Ahmed the same question, and he smiled, remembering the previous night when a drunken Algerian had called him a "dirty Arab." Curiously enough, the Algerian had spoken the truth without meaning to. Ahmed's clothes and hands were grimy from slapping glue on a hundred billboards between Monte Carlo and Nice, and he looked like most Arab construction workers do, except the one whose face was unrecognizable after a plaster ledge he was working on gave way, sending him crashing on to the *jardin publique*.

A good many of my neighbors are Arabs, and, while I have never seen six to a room, three is not uncommon. One reason local landlords are generally reluctant to rent to a single Algerian or Tunisian is the suspicion that there will soon be two or three or more. It was because of these overcrowded living conditions (and relatively low wages for unskilled laborers in the building trades) that hundreds of foreign immigrants, Arabs for the most part, marched on the Grasse city hall last summer, precipitating a near-riot when the police turned firehoses on the demonstrators.

Unfortunately, the episode in Grasse is not an isolated one, as racial incidents flare up all over Provence. In Marseille, following the senseless slaying of a French busdriver by a deranged Algerian immigrant, white vigilante groups, armed and usually traveling in a high-speed car, opened fire on half a dozen Arab pedestrians, killing at least two. In Fréjus, two bars owned and frequented by Arabs have been *plastiqué* (bombed) by unknown nightriders, spreading fear in the neighborhood even after the owners cleaned up the *débris*. Ironically, the temporary suspension by the Algerian government of all further emigration is precisely what certain right-wing groups have been demanding. In addition to an end to "unchecked immigration," they are also seeking more stringent passport control, a tactic which could boomerang, because the migrants who have the reputation for working without the proper papers are the Portuguese, not the North Africans.

In Venice, on the other hand, we have had no racial trouble of any sort. And while Ahmed complained that once his salary check was withheld for three weeks by his French employer, it is also true that the company advances him what he needs on a day-to-day basis. In addition, he can always borrow from uncles and cousins who earn six francs an hour as construction workers, a third of that, however, going back to M'Saken every week—a debit in the French balance of payments, but a matter of indifference to local merchants and landlords, who make no special

effort to attract what disposable income the Arab has left. (Most North Africans, therefore, buy the bulk of their household needs and new clothes in the semiweekly open-air market, rather than at Prismic or any of the local shops.)

Yet the interesting thing is that the same Frenchman who sees something wrong with a system which gives equal unemployment benefits to citizens and alien alike, and who appears particularly indignant about the preferential fiscal and monetary treatment granted certain foreign workers, has nothing but praise for the Portuguese, Spaniards and black Africans. So it is not just the white European against the African, or Catholic against Moslem, but, rather, a minority "nativist" attitude—like the reaction of some white Britons to Asians and West Indians, and of some middle-class New York Jews to an unwanted lower income (black) housing project in their borough of Queens.

Of course, what it really boils down to is who is assimilable and who is not, and, despite their blackness, some Africans lose their *négritude* faster than lighter skinned Arabs. If Diamantino, my Portuguese friend from Espinho, is any example, the Portuguese also seem to have acquired this same talent of assimilation, a personal observation confirmed recently by a French government report citing the Portuguese as the least ethnocentric (i.e., the most likely to adopt French values) of all the immigrant groups in the country.

Unlike the vast majority of Portuguese migrants who cross the frontier clandestinely, Diamantino Pereyra arrived in France seven years ago with a bona fide work contract. By most standards, he has done well, working days as a mason, the trade *par excellence* of illiterate immigrants, whether from Italy, Portugal or North Africa, and helping Lucie, his French *petite amie*, in their small café at night. Because of Diamantino and his friends, Le Tout Petit Bar has become the social center of the small Portuguese colony in Venice, and there the talk is a mixture of Portuguese and French, underscoring the ambiguity of the Portuguese worker in France. Although Diamantino himself is now a French citizen, most of his friends have not changed their nationality. José, for example, insists he will not give up his Portuguese citizenship, but he is also uninclined to return to his village outside Lisbon, where he is classified as a draft dodger, having fled four years ago to escape military service. In these circumstances, it would be imprudent for him even to visit his family. In Diamantino's case, however, he has been back on several occasions, eager to show off his new wealth, but of two minds whether he could ever again live in such an underdeveloped country.

In the bar the talk is seldom about conditions back home, each man subconsciously realizing that what

his own country could not provide, meaning a decent home and job, France has. For the younger men this is sufficient compensation for tearing up one's roots. For the older men it is a means to an end, entailing sacrifices in France so that their families can be housed and clothed until they are able to go back to their *terra* richer than when they started.

Dining one evening at Le Tout Petit I discussed this problem with a middle-aged Spanish worker, Antonio, who settled in Vence twelve years ago when the Spanish colony was flourishing and with its own bar down the street from the Papillon. Now there are few Spaniards left in the Vence region because of Spain's own growing need for almost every kind of manual laborer. Antonio, then, is one of the last to go; and, while his wife and three children are already installed in a Barcelona apartment, he will stay on until his present work contract is fulfilled because he is earning good wages. Yet, from what he hears, semi-skilled construction workers like himself, with twenty years' experience, can expect to earn almost as much, in real purchasing power, in his country as they do in Provence. Of course, having thought in those terms for all his adult life, Antonio is not going to change now; but one suspects that Spain represents what Puerto Rico does for the unassimilated Puerto Rican Americans, the native land to which distance lends enchantment.

It would have been different, perhaps, had he learned to speak French correctly, like his children; but because he rarely socialized with French people, his inarticulateness was no special handicap. He had hoped, however, that his youngsters, with their French diploma, would be able to find a good, clean, office job. When it appeared that no French employer would hire them (over equally qualified French graduates), he resolved to take the family to Barcelona, where the two oldest quickly found the type of white-collar employment their qualifications called for.

Whether or not one could rightly call this discrimination is difficult to say, because in Paris, for example, these second generation French-Iberians

are ascending the socioeconomic ladder, entering occupations other than those traditionally filled by all immigrant groups. But, of course, this is Provence, and here even the *pied noir*, that European African, is a social outcast in many places, probably for the same reason the Portuguese and Spaniards have aroused less overt hostility in the Alpes Maritimes than in the Paris region. That is, where any large number of alien males moves into a previously settled, relatively homogeneous community the level of tolerance seems in inverse ratio to this group's percentage of the total population. Which would explain why Joao, my young Portuguese friend, felt happier in Vence than in a working-class suburb of Paris where the Portuguese had acquired much the same reputation Arabs have in Marseille.

The Provence that is not in the guide-books, then, is the Provence of a thousand construction sites and hotel kitchens dependent almost entirely on tens of thousands of Mustafahs and Josés; of retired English couples trying to cope with the fluctuating value of the pound sterling, and of hot-tempered *pieds noirs*, dispossessed of their shops and farms by victorious Arab nationalists, many of whom are now looking for jobs in France. This is the Provence tourists miss because they are not looking for prejudice in a perfume factory or expecting to find Tunisian and Algerian migrants eating *couscous* in the ramparts of these old European cities.

It couldn't be more paradoxical: Seven hundred years after the Saracens carried their holy war to this Mediterranean shore a predominately Moslem labor force is constructing a modern Babylon, paid for with Judeo-Christian capital and inhabited principally by cloistered bourgeois families protected by their mean dogs and "entry forbidden" signs. Thus is the pilgrim of today warned not to approach too closely the private property of modern Europeans while inspecting the great Provençal civilization of the late Middle Ages.