



From Columbus to Antonio Sanchez Peres: 530 years of voyages

The famous writer Yuval Harari, in his well-known work *Sapiens*, describes Christopher Columbus's search for an investor for what was then considered his 'adventure' in search of lands to the east of Europe:

Like a good entrepreneur in a start-up today, Columbus did not give up [he had already received some rejections]. He presented his idea to other potential investors in Italy, France, England, and again in Portugal. On all these occasions he was turned down. As a result, he tried his luck with Fernando and Isabel [the Catholic Monarchs], governors of the recently unified Spain.

Everyone knows the end of the story. In 1492, Christopher Columbus moored in America. What few realise is the importance of this historical fact for every single one of us. After all, there are those who admire the European cultural millennium, who do business with Europe, who count down the days to visit it during the holidays, and who descend from Europeans and inhabit the Americas, having migrated here themselves, or as a result of their ancestors. If it weren't for Columbus and the confidence of S. M. Isabel the Catholic, this "approximation" between America and Europe would never have begun.

Indeed, my Galician grandfather, Antonio Sanchez Peres, following the path opened by 'Colon', as he is called in Spain. He migrated to Brazil almost a century ago, fleeing from the adverse conditions of the Spanish Civil War, and arrived with his family, while still young, in Belém, Pará (not, in fact, in Salvador, Bahia, where one of the largest populations of Galicians in the world would settle).

The Port of Belém, being closer to Europe, allowed for a more affordable ticket, and so (as I later discovered) enabled the first Spanish immigrants to arrive in Brazil. Amongst those was my paternal family, fleeing from adversities on the peninsula.

Many years later, my grandfather was a prosperous businessman in Belém, and we had a good relationship. We were friends, and we understood one another. As well as being my relative, he was also my godfather, my greatest encourager and an example of the ‘self-made man’ who triumphed in the face of real adversities as an immigrant; who brought with him nothing but health, willingness, and the will to succeed in a land that was more peaceful, as well as full of opportunities.

As my father was his business partner, the three of us were often together, despite the distances that we had to travel, sometimes by car. This was nothing to my father, one of sixteen children of an immigrant who had crossed the Atlantic by ship to establish himself commercially in Brazil.

I always woke early – a family habit – and I was greatly surprised on one occasion when my grandfather was not poring over the Bible at daybreak, as was his habit (he was always very Catholic), but displaying two large fish that had been caught during the night by two hooks that I had thrown over the deck of his house, which extended over a beautiful, large and fish-filled lake. Until today, I don’t know if I was happier about the capture of those two enormous aquatic specimens with the hooks and fishing line that I had requested from their warehouse the day before, or with the uncontained happiness of my grandfather, who had told me about his journey that had begun with sailors who didn’t let him read the Gospels, and concluded in that beautiful discovery and capture.

“Oh, son, you’ll be a hardworking man and you’ll never be hungry!” he said to me in jubilation, embracing me. “Let’s eat these fish for dinner!”

And so went without doubt the most agreeable “cena” (dinner) – in Spanish and Portuguese - of my life. My grandparents were happy, and my father was evidently proud of his son. At 12 years old, I received my first lesson in entrepreneurialism and meritocracy.

It was only many years later, after visiting the city of my grandfather’s birth and learning about the difficulties that his contemporaries suffered, that I could appreciate more fully the importance of those fish to him...

*

Twenty-five years later, and after much hard work, I was a lawyer with a history of professional success. The prediction of my grandfather had come true: I grew up to be attached to work. A turning point came, however, when I decided to hire Professor Guillermo. He as a Madrileño with a Master’s in Castilian, as well as hard-working and very didactic. I spent practically all the available hours in his schedule pursuing the unshakeable objective of stopping speaking “Portoñol” and, finally, mastering like a native (or at least as nearly as possible) the Spanish language. At last, this first real challenge took me back to the excitement of the fish caught in the lake!

Guillermo was perfectionistic and demanding. Or rather, he was exactly what I wanted. He constantly warned me against any error in pronunciation, as well as chastising me that I, a Spanish citizen like him, did not have complete command of ‘Castilian’, and even less of the culture and geography of Spain! Later, I discovered that the Spanish Constitution prescribes in its 3rd article that ‘Castilian is the official Spanish language of

the State. All Spaniards have the duty to learn it and the right to use it.” Guillermo was always right.

After six months of intensive, exhausting and daily lessons, I asked Guillermo if he would recommend a Master’s in Spain: I was feeling my DNA speak more loudly, and I wanted to deepen my knowledge of the country of my ancestors. The Professor’s wife had a friend who worked at the prestigious Institute of Empresas Business School – I. E. One of the best business schools in the world.

*

I could hardly believe it when I found myself sat before one of the most important people in Spain: Santiago Iñiguez de Onzoño, today the President of the Institute of Empresas. On this occasion, he was our admirable and magnificent Rector. The lunch passed with the friendliness and lightness that were always peculiar to him, and I thanked him for his motivation to maintain this bridge between Brazil and Spain, having offered me the first interview in the ABRESCCO Magazine, whose inaugural edition we celebrated, with the right to a photo and everything at the end.

I discovered that some people are motivated by material things; others, by spiritual and moral goods that role models are capable of representing to us. I then had my first epiphany: I discovered that I was an idealist. That lunch was the beginning of something that has led me to cross the Atlantic more than a hundred times, initially, in the search for my origins, motivated by the pure instinct of Spanish DNA represented by my grandfather and my first great role model. And afterwards, by idealism.

We decided to pay homage to the myriads of immigrants who crossed the Atlantic for the Americas, such as the intrepid Columbus 530 years ago, and Antonio Sanchez Peres, in his poetic and valiant manner, to perpetuate their examples. And we were fortunate enough to be graced with a son, also Spanish (“hecho in España”), honoured with the name of my grandfather.

The ABRESCCO Magazine – purposely without any sponsorship, and still fuelled by the idealism of its founders (myself and Joaci Goes Filho) – was such a resounding success that it earned me a prestigious commendation, conferred by S. M. King Philip VI of Spain: “Isabel, The Catholic”. Yes, that very same celebrity mentioned earlier, who bet on Columbus.

Together with the Magazine ABRESCCO, we founded ABRESCCO S.L. - Acercamientos Brasil España en Cultura y Comercio – to seek closer cultural and business ties between Brazil and Spain. This is now expanding to other European countries.

So much so that, four years ago, I received an invitation to represent the Republic of Romania as the Honorary Consul of this country in Salvador, Bahia, a role that I fulfil with great honour and determination. The activity of an honorary consul is a gift for an idealist of the kind who goes to sleep dreaming of the fish that he will be able to catch the next day...

Antonio Peres Junior

(Lawyer, Businessman, Honorary Consul-General of Romania in Salvador, BA)