

THE RE-CONQUEST of 5300 Waverly St. by the Sá clan from Portugal was a decade-long exercise that began in 1971.

At first, they thought it strange to find a bathroom in the living room and a kitchen in an upstairs bedroom

A fig tree grows in Mile End

MARIANNE ACKERMAN SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

When Maria Sá stepped over the threshold of 5300 Waverly St. for the first time in the spring of 1971, she started to cry. Ten years after she and her husband Manuel had made the difficult leap from their village in the Azores, six children in tow, they were finally able to purchase a house. It was a wreck.

The front veranda steps were rotten; hardwood floors bulged and sloped in waves; the walls were covered in dark, water-stained wallpaper; a toilet and sink dominated the dining room where an elderly woman had spent her final years.

Even before heading upstairs, Maria could tell this house would consume hundreds of hours of hard work and thousands of dollars. She remembers a snake in the garden, mice and spiders galore. Her first step was to call in the exterminators.

Thirty-five years later, the fragile great-grandmother still shivers at the memory. "I thought Manuel must have gone crazy," she recalls. "I said, 'Why this house?'"

The answer was simple. When a friend who had done some plumbing for the owner, Maurice Rosenberg, learned the house was coming up for sale, Manuel paid a visit, and made an offer.

They settled on \$9,000, even in the depressed market of the times, a good price for an eight-room cottage with a front and back yard.

More important, this house had what each of their five rented apartments on the Plateau had lacked: a basement. Make that an earth-floor cave, spacious, relatively profound, the perfect place to make wine, a stellar location for late-night card games.

For the next 13 years, male members of the Sá family would make sure the women and children were comfortable upstairs, but their hearts were in that basement.

It would be months before Maria, her daughters Celina and Alice felt at home on Waverly St. As always, the crisis revived old doubts. Once again, she wondered whether leaving the Azores island of São Miguel, with its lush vegetation, pearl beaches and year-round summer, had been such a great idea.

Like most family narratives, the Sá's exists in several versions. Maria and her daughters insist they left because the older boys, Albano and Balbino, were of draft age and would soon be sent to fight in Angola or Mozambique, colonial wars from which many young men never returned.

In Maria's recollection, village life in Lombinha da Maia was good. They'd had a house, inherited from her father; Manuel was self-employed with a variety of jobs, mainly outdoors. She knew everyone and had many friends.

But Albano, who runs a wholesale grocery business on the Plateau Mont Royal, says his father always longed to flee the meagre prospects of subsistence farming. "He applied to every consulate he could find. He was always looking for a way out. There was nothing back there. You could barely feed a family."

They do agree that Maria's sudden enthusiasm was crucial to the move. The couple brought their two older boys and baby Alice, leaving the middle three behind with relatives until they could afford to send for them a year later.

From two parents and six children, the Sá family of Montreal now numbers 18 grandchildren and 12 great-grandchildren. Maria's parents joined them in 1970, and lived to be over 100.

Fiercely attached to their language and culture, the Sá's are a warm, loquacious brood that delights in recalling the past. Maria's apartment in Villeray is a photo gallery of weddings, baptisms, graduations, holidays; her cabinets are filled with precious family memorabilia.

During an evening I spent in the matriarch's living room, her grown children recounted stories of their life on Waverly, embellishing, correcting, savouring the favourites.

At 85, a diminutive woman who speaks little French and no English, Maria soon got lost in the exchange. Finally, she interrupted with a burst of Portuguese, joyful but tinged with sadness: "I spent the best years of my life in that house. My children, my grandchildren, everything happening. I was so happy, I had them all around me then."

In the silence that followed, Celina's husband, Manuel da Costa, a burly man who had stayed in the background, spoke up. "People always say the past was better," he declared. "Some day we'll look back on these days, and we'll say they were golden, too. But let me tell you one



Alice's wedding in 1980 was the last big Sá family event at 5300 Waverly St. As her sister Celina had done, she gathered members of the wedding party on the front staircase for pictures. Alice is on the arm of her proud father, Manuel, while her mother, Maria, stands at the far back, smiling.

thing, that house launched the Sá family. Everything that happened to us started back there. When it was sold, we went our separate ways."

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About 40,000 Montrealers have Portuguese roots. The first surge came in the mid-1950s, thanks to a deal between the two national governments that sought to address Canada's labour shortage in construction, agriculture, forestry, railroads, and Portugal's high unemployment.

Montrealer Manuel de Almeida Moura has written a lively popular history of "the pioneers," including an evocative selection of photographs. Leaving home are rows of dark-haired men in their prime, serious suits, white shirts and ties, faces firm with expectation; a few pages later, they're knee-deep in snow, wearing plaid shirts and hard hats.

Maria's brother-in-law Agostinho Couto was one of first. In the decade that followed his arrival, he sponsored more than 50 family members, including the Sá's. Though they weren't bound by the same terms of entry, the Sá males had a brief crack at rural life, Manuel, as a lumberjack in northern Quebec, Albano on a pig farm in La Prairie.

Scarcely 15 at the time, Albano missed his family too much and quit after two months, found a job in a Greek bakery on Napoleon St. The wages were the same, \$15 a week, but included a perk: three or four extra loaves of bread at the end of each day, which he sold while delivering groceries to Portuguese families.

Thus, began the first of several Sá brothers enterprises that led to two grocery stores on the Plateau Mont-Royal and Albano's wholesale business. Balbino has died, but his three sons still run the Epicierie Sá et Fils on Villeneuve and St. Urbain.

Eventually, Manuel settled into a job as a cook at St. Patrick's Orphanage, steady pay, though a long way from the variety and independence of his old life. If he

weeks stripping down the stairway banister, fighting their way through many layers of paint. Each project gave rise to lavish meals once the hammers and saws fell silent.

A slim, dark-haired woman with matriarchal impulses, Alice Sá has inherited her mother's unyielding memory. While inspecting the upstairs bathroom as it is now, she recalled the earlier transformation: "You wouldn't believe it. When my uncles renovated this same bathroom years ago, they built a second wall around the first with two-by-fours. I said, 'What? You're taking away a closet and building a box?'"

That same venture saw a well-meaning handyman put his foot through the dining room ceiling by mistake.

The reconquest of 5300 Waverly by the Sá clan was a decade-long exercise, proceeding in fits and reversals. While at first glance, they thought it strange to find a bathroom in the living room and a kitchen in an upstairs bedroom, the latter was put to good use when newly wed Celina and Manuel da Costa decided to stay for a couple of years, and save money. Their presence prompted installation of a second bathroom in the basement – a cement-encased vault. Thirty years later, the present owners were told a jackhammer would be required to fix a dripping shower head.

As grandchildren were born, Maria turned the downstairs living room into a playroom, where she could take care of babies while their parents worked. The mortgage, a private loan from family, was soon paid off. Before her wedding, Celina paid for a new front porch because the old one would have looked terrible in the photographs. Alice had a part-time job in high school and always contributed to the household economy.

Sundays were the liveliest day of the week, an open house where four, then five and six married Sá's, their mates and kids came over after church to feast. Neighbours used to complain about the traffic jam. The photo albums are filled with snaps of toddlers and skinny adolescents seated around the table, and jammed somewhere into most of them, Maria and Manuel, faintly smiling, as if the whole boisterous endeavour were somehow still a surprise.

Alice's wedding in 1980 was the last big family event at 5300 Waverly. She met Jose Manuel on a trip to Portugal, a tall, good-looking man, and brought him back to Montreal. As Celina had done, she lined her bridesmaids up on the front staircase for pictures, a cascade of pretty girls in gowns and grinning boys in pale suits.

A few years later, Alice and Jose Manuel put a down payment on a home of their own, a duplex on de la Roche St. Sá senior acted quickly. The next morning, a for sale sign went up in the front yard. By afternoon 5300 Waverly was sold, for \$59,000.

"We were shocked," Alice recalls. "My father said he didn't see the point in a big house without children. But they had nowhere to go. We suggested they take our upstairs apartment."

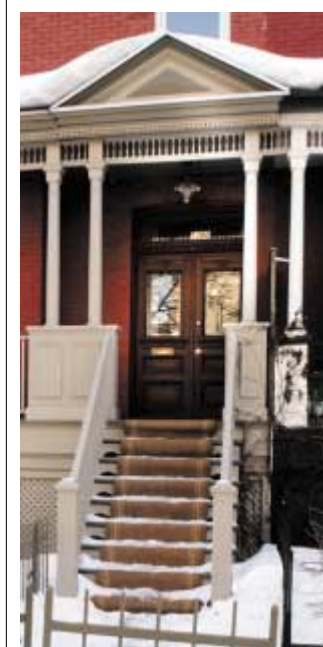
Instead, they bought the top half and soon after, moved into the white, brick-faced duplex a half-block south of Jean Talon. A good move, as things turned out. Four months later, Manuel Sá was diagnosed with throat cancer. He died in 1989. Maria Sá has lived upstairs ever since.

Next Saturday: Sweat equity



Top: Siblings Celina, John and Octavio (tall) were left back in Portugal with relatives until their parents could afford to send for them. Middle: Alice on the day of her sister's wedding. Above: Alice (left), Celina and their mother, Maria, visit their former home this week and get reacquainted with the banister they once spent weeks stripping of many layers of paint.

PART FOUR OF FIVE



Author Marianne Ackerman and her husband are the 12th owners of a two-storey cottage at 5300 Waverly St. in Mile End. The paper trail left by previous occupants of the house built in 1898 reveals struggle and speculation, good luck and perseverance, immigrant stories and tales of social climbing – and mysteries yet to be solved. To catch up on previous installments, visit www.montrealgazette.com



GORDON BECK THE GAZETTE