Jorge de Sena’s Advice to his Fellow Exiles

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For the celebration on June 10, 1979 of the “Day of Portugal, Camões, and the Portuguese Communities,” the Secretaria de Estado da Cultura issued a modestly-sized anthology of Jorge de Sena’s work. The selections for Versos e Alguma Prosa de Jorge de Sena were made by Eugênio Lisboa. Included was an excerpt from the famous Sena interview published in the journal O Tempo e o Modo in 1968. This excerpt, translated from Portuguese by George Monteiro, was given, editorially, the title of “Viver no estrangeiro.” This translation appeared originally in The Portuguese Times, New Bedford, Massachusetts, on August 9, 1979, and has not been previously reprinted.

Life in Foreign Parts
I always insist, jokingly, that Portugal can achieve no salvation until every single Portuguese person is compelled, by law, to spend several years outside his country, and prohibited for the length of that stay from associating with fellow countrymen. This injunction is of the utmost importance if the Portuguese are to be prevented from collecting over a sardine fry, from gathering to boil their cod in fervid nationalism or to exchange greedily the latest tidbits from the Chiado. Let them live in foreign lands, not as immigrants in “colonies,” clutching to one another, but in the very midst of the foreign element, so learning its language and so assimilating its mores that they know that one knows they exist—a fact which, though reflecting an injustice, is a great truth. As for the rest, the saddest and greatest lesson one will discover is that standing up for Portugal calls for knowing more about our country than the Portuguese know, and that nearly all Portuguese in foreign parts experience the cultural shame of having the Lusophile know much about Portugal, and,
I say it in all seriousness, knowing more than they do. In my case, I do not believe that nine years of life abroad, a period begun when I was just about to turn forty, has fundamentally altered my interests or my “socio-cultural education.” I was never one to be confined to the short stretch from Melgaço to Vila Real de Santo António; not I, a notorious “foreigner” exactly like some of my ancestors, among the most notorious in all of Portugal’s literary history. But there is no doubt that the experience of life in Brazil (Juscelino’s Brazil and João Goulart’s and that Brazil of the counter-revolution against the revolution which never did exist except in the dreams of a fairer Brazil), and of life in the United States—in the former among Brazilians, here among Americans (admittedly in the environs of a highly cosmopolitan society as befits a great American university)—opened my eyes to some of the hard realities of the contemporary world. It is a vision of a kind that I rarely encounter in Portuguese publications, even between the lines. I have learned, for example, that cruelty and injustice are terrifyingly universal, that all forms of government are inordinately imperfect, and that the same pettiness and the same stupidity thrive everywhere. In no way has this turned me into a cynic or a resigned conformist, in relation to my usual ideas, but it has given me insight into, and a bitter prudence toward, generalizations and particulars. In short, I want to record here what it was like, for me, to live in that complete democracy, for all its defects and its shortcomings, which was the government of President Kubitschek, and to experience the magnificence of those months of headiest hope during the government of João Goulart, before the nature of what must ensue became all too evident. The judgments I make are not politically motivated. They merely refer to the experiences of my own life. By the same token, I now find it invaluable to be alive in the United States in the midst of the protracted crises through which the country is now passing, even though at every moment one suffers the deep torments of humanity.