

Carnaval do Galway The Brazilian Community in Gort, 1999-2006

By Claire Healy

Gort Inse Guaire, or Gort, lies just north of the border with County Clare in south County Galway in the West of Ireland, and has a population of about three thousand people. It is situated between the Slieve Aughty mountains and the unique karstic limestone landscape of the Burren, in the heartland of the countryside made famous by Lady Augusta Gregory and the poet W.B. Yeats in nearby Coole Park and Thoor Ballylee. Nineteenth-century Gort was a thriving market town providing a commercial centre for its fertile agricultural hinterland. A market was held in the market square every Saturday, and



Sabor Brasil shop on Georges St., Gort
(Claire Healy 2006)

sheep, cattle and pig fairs were held regularly. A cavalry barracks accommodating eight British officers and eighty-eight soldiers was situated near the town and the Dublin and Limerick mail coaches trundled along the main street. [1] Throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, day labourers congregated on the market square in the centre of town hoping for a day's seasonal work on a farm.

By the 1990s, the town had become a quiet and sparsely populated shadow of its former self. Many of the shops along the main street, Georges Street, were shutting their doors for the last time, and the town was familiar to most Irish people only as a brief stop on the bus route from Galway to the southern cities of Cork and Limerick. Driving south from the city of Galway to the approaches to Gort, the bus passes by Labane Graveyard, fronted by a life-size golden statue of Jesus Christ with his arms outstretched, reminiscent of the iconic thirty-metre high statue of Christ the Redeemer on Corcovado Mountain in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

In 1999, a poultry factory in County Roscommon applied to the Irish government for work permits and hired a number of people from Vila Fabril, just outside the city of Anápolis in the state of Goiás in Central Brazil. Shortly thereafter, Seán Duffy Meat Exports Ltd. in the outskirts of Gort followed suit and about six people made the journey from Goiás to Connacht. The migrant workers to whom the permits were issued were skilled in meat processing, yet received low wages for their labours in Brazil. The young workers were both male and female, and had worked for a large factory in Vila Fabril that recently closed down.



Bilingual Community Newsletter, Issue 2 (cover illustration)

community who hail from urban areas in Brazil such as Anápolis and São Paulo value the relative safety that rural Ireland offers for their children. The ensuing seven years have resulted in a demographic revolution in the small Galway town, the population of which is currently estimated to be between 25 and 30 per cent Brazilian-born. There are signs that, as is the case in most migrant communities, some of the Brazilians in Gort are there to stay.

By Autumn 2004, when Duffy's was seriously damaged by a fire, at least fifty Brazilian people were working at the plant. Fortunately no-one was injured. [2] Still today a significant proportion of the staff of Duffy's are Brazilian and signs in the factory are printed in both English and Portuguese. Seán Duffy considers them to be reliable, diligent workers and he provides English classes to his Portuguese-speaking employees. [3] A conflagration was again the reason for a tragedy among Gort's Brazilian community in early December 2005. Two young Brazilian men, Roberto Perna Ramos, aged 27, and his uncle Erli Rodrigues da Silva, aged 43, died in their sleep when the building in which they were living burnt down. The local Gort community of Irish and Brazilian people collected enough money in the wake of the tragedy to repatriate the men's remains, and to contribute to the purchase of a house in Brazil for each of their families. [4]

A large community of Brazilians now live, work and attend school in Gort, gradually altering the appearance and the character of the town. A Pentecostal congregation, the *Assembléia de Deus*, has set up a church in the area and the community holds their own *carnaval* every Summer. There is also a Brazilian Catholic community in the town, ministered to by a Limerick-based priest Fr. Seán Lawler, who says mass in Portuguese every Sunday in Gort Catholic Church. The local football team has naturally benefited from Brazilian talent and experience, while the main thoroughfare now boasts two Brazilian shops, "Sabor Brasil" on Georges Street and "Real Brazil" on Crowe Street, where Brazilians and other customers can purchase Guaraná drinks, palm hearts, Brazilian coffee, *feijão* and other necessities. The local fruit and vegetable shop, "Gort Country Market," run by Paul Walsh, stocks a wide variety of reasonably priced Brazilian fruit and vegetables, such as pinto beans and *mandioca* (cassava) and advertises its discount prices in both English and Portuguese. The shop also imports refrigerated products from Brazil, via London, including *pão de queijo* (cheese bread) and *polpas de frutas* (fruit pulps). Recently local chain supermarkets have also begun to stock Brazilian products.

The occupational distribution of the community has now diversified, with a number of Brazilians working in the retail, catering, construction and transport sectors, as well as in Duffy's. They currently

account for about 40% of the rental market in Gort. Many are on temporary one-year employment permits and their continuing right to live and work in Ireland is not assured, particularly in view of the large numbers of Eastern European migrants with unlimited residence competing for similar jobs.

The combined efforts of the Irish and Brazilian communities in Gort have resulted in the publication of a bilingual community newsletter which published its first issue in February 2006. The newsletter provides advertising, news of events and general news to the town and surrounding parishes in English, Portuguese, and often with a smattering of Irish thrown in. The community has been the subject of documentaries by the German television station ARD for its *Weltspiegel* programme and the *Financial Times Deutschland*, and has featured on the Irish station RTÉ's programmes *Ear to the Ground* and *No Place Like Home*.



Gort Country Market, Georges St,
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The Associação Brasileira de Gort, founded in October 2005, provides assistance, advice, health promotion and translation services to the community two days per week in the Family Resource Centre, and is staffed by seven volunteers - four Brazilians and three Irish people. [5] A Brazilian Women's Group, "Amizade em Ação" (Friendship in Action) also meets once a week with a programme of talks, art, aerobics and group dynamics. [6] The local community school provides both courses in English as a foreign language for the Brazilian community, and Portuguese courses for the local community.

Very few Brazilians intend to remain and settle in Gort, yet one has a sense that the community is there to stay and many may change their mind as they build a life for themselves in the small market town, the population of which is finally beginning to return to its 1830s levels. At the market square people are again beginning to congregate in the mornings in the hope of a day's work, though they speak in Brazilian Portuguese rather than in Irish or English. According to journalist Kathy Sheridan, some Brazilians in Roscommon are now 'doing what the Irish emigrants used to do: scouting out jobs for siblings and in-laws in places such as Athenry, Gort and Roscommon and advancing their fares if necessary.' [7] By now some of Gort's Brazilians have lived and worked in Ireland long enough to obtain a permanent residence permit and it is clear that many of them will join the ranks of the 'New Irish' of the twenty-first century.

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Notes

[1] Galway Rural Development, 'Local History, Gort, County Galway' on:
<http://www.gortononline.com/TouristGuide/GortLocalHistory/Gort+Local+History.htm>.

[2] Ferrie, Liam (ed.). *The Irish Emigrant* Issue No. 922 (Oct 2004). Available online at:

<http://www.emigrant.ie/article.asp?iCategoryID=177&iArticleID=35928>

[3] O'Brien, Carl. "All this will enrich the culture" in 'The New Irish,' *The Irish Times*, 10 May 2004, p15.

[4] 'News' in: *Bilingual Community Newsletter/Jornal Bilingue da Comunidade*, Issue 1, February 2006, p4.

[5] 'The Brazilian Association of Gort - "Helping Brazilians to help themselves"' in *Bilingual Community Newsletter/Jornal Bilingue da Comunidade*, Issue 1, February 2006, pp12-13; Vieira, Nilton, 'Imigração na Europa: Entre a Necessidade e o Medo' in *Bilingual Community Newsletter/Jornal Bilingue da Comunidade*, Issue 3, April 2006, p5.

[6] 'Grupo para Mulheres: "Amizade em Ação" Brazilian Women's Friendship Group' in *Bilingual Community Newsletter/Jornal Bilingue da Comunidade*, Issue 1, February 2006, p13; Enereh, Monica, 'Fique por dentro do que está acontecendo em nossa comunidade!!' in *Bilingual Community Newsletter/Jornal Bilingue da Comunidade*, Issue 2, March 2006, p14.

[7] Sheridan, Kathy. 'Grateful to God and Roscommon' in 'The New Irish,' *The Irish Times*, 10 May 2004, p15.

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