

# JOSÉ SARAMAGO

## RAISED FROM THE GROUND

FROM THE ALENTEJAN PLAINS TO THE BUSTLE OF THE MUNDET FACTORY IN SEIXAL

URBAN PARK OF SEIXAL  
FROM 2 JULY TO 31 DECEMBER 2022



José Saramago  
CENTENÁRIO



SEIXAL  
câmara municipal



Fundação José Saramago  
[www.josesaramago.org](http://www.josesaramago.org)

## [THE MUNDET FACTORY IN SEIXAL]

*From the ground, we know that they raised the crops and the trees, they raised the animals that would run through the fields or fly above, they raised men and all of their hopes.*

*«Raised from the Ground», 1980*

Integrated into the Commemorations of the Centenary of the Birth of José Saramago, this exhibition aims to present the workers of the Mundet factory and the cork oaks, labour and raw material essential to the expansion of the Mundet cork business and, simultaneously, to the economic, sociocultural and political development of Seixal throughout the 20th century.

The Mundet Factory was powered by the labour of many hundreds of workers arriving from every point of the country but especially from the Alentejo region in the 1950s and 1960s. In Seixal council, these migrants integrated into the local community and set down their roots and hopes.

The exhibition also integrates the work of the scientific illustrator, Mafalda Paiva, on the theme of cork oaks and cork, ranging from the rural work associated with the cork-cutting season to the transport of cork to the factory.

*Having been born to work, it would be a contradiction to abuse leisure time. The best machine is always the one most capable of working continuously, lubricated enough so as not to breakdown, fed without any excess and, if possible, to the economic limit of simple maintenance but, above all, be easy to replace, if this one breaks down, another ages, the disposal sites for this waste are called cemeteries, or instead sit machinelike in their doorways, all rusty and creaky, watching nobody and nothing go by, looking only at their ever so sad hands: those who saw me and those who see me now.*

*«Raised from the Ground», 1980*



Awarding the City of Lisbon Prize to José Saramago for his book «Raised from the Ground» on 1 June 1982.



Copy of the 1<sup>st</sup> edition of «Raised from the Ground», 1981.



Mundet Factory, in Montijo.

## [THE FACTORY POPULATION OF MUNDET]

*Men, who have neither rest nor seat, from one place to another like the errant Jew (...) I know full well what I do, in Landeira, there's good people, there's work that's worthwhile, and I am a man of art, not going around grasping the butt of a hoe like your father and brothers, I learned a trade and am enabled. (...) But when they got to their new house, they saw that the timber was showing signs of most serious damage. On that floor, Domingos, we even ended up without any furniture.*

*What the house has would fit with the sum that there was to pay, so small the sum, so small the house, the rent (...) in this house that is only wall and door, one room downstairs and another upstairs, via a little staircase that trembles whenever you set foot on it, and the light turned off whenever we're not there.*

*«Raised from the Ground», 1980*

In 1905, the firm of Catalan origin, L. Mundet & Sons – of which Mundet & C.ª, Lda. (1922-1988) was the successor in Portugal – opened a factory next to the town of Seixal.

Focusing on activities that ranged from sourcing raw materials to product sales, Mundet stood out for the great variety of products manufactured and the concentration of labour. In 1938, employment at the Seixal factory peaked at 2,474 members of staff. For many of these workers, this was their introduction to the discipline and rhythms of factory production. The daily lives of the workers operating the cork machinery became characterised by the sequence of repetitive and paced actions of their movements ongoing without rest and in silence throughout long days of labour in exchange for only meagre wages.

Due to the historical, economic and social relevance of what was once one of the largest cork factories in the world, this site is recognised for its important role in the local memory which connects the factory with the labour and daily lives of various generations of workers.

*On that day, there was an aggressive wind, cutting as a barber, that couldn't be tolerated, and well, with his body badly clothed, everything has its own explanation, António Mau-Tempo gave the pigs a day-off and hid himself behind a machuco, What is a machuco, A machuco is a young chaparro, around here everybody knows that, And a chaparro, A chaparro is a young cork oak, of course it is, So then, a machuco is a cork oak, Sure, you hadn't quite seen that (...)*

*«Raised from the Ground», 1980*



The presence of the cork industry reflected in the growth in population of the former town of Seixal, which reached 3,911 inhabitants in 1940.



In 1925, in houses that would accommodate four or five people with some difficulty, there were seven, eight or more persons living. Some families occupied only one section of the house with correspondingly poor habitation, hygiene and living conditions.



Workers leaving the factory.

## [WOMEN AND CHILD WORKERS ]

*(...) the strength of arms of both is, with little difference, required or despised by the landed gentry, after all, there's not that much difference between women and men, apart from in their wages.*

*"My son, they gave me work for you out of charity, for me to earn a little something, because life is very hard and we have no means left." And João Mau-Tempo, knowing about life, asked, "Am I going to dig, mother?" Sara da Conceição would have said if she could "No, you're not, you're only ten, it's no work for a child (...)*

*«Raised from the Ground», 1980*

Improvements in the machinery enabled women to work in the diverse sectors of production, undertaking repetitive tasks, with a lack of diversity and requiring a great deal of attention.

With identical levels of qualification and carrying out the same work as men, women nevertheless received lower wages. This disparity between the genders prevailed in the cork industry until 2015.

Stemming from the difficulties existing in sustaining the household, the children would begin working life when still young.

In its first years of operation, the Mundet factory in Seixal was accepting workers as from the age of nine. After 1927, the legislation limited factory employment to workers with a minimum age of twelve.

In the 1940s, out of all the workers in the Mundet factories in Seixal and Amora, 52% were in the ten to fifteen years of age category.

In 1974, the factory was still employing 27 minors aged between fourteen and nineteen.

*He senses he is the one wanted, right from the moment the foreman says, "João Mau-Tempo, go and talk to the guard", everything will be like pulling off a strip of cork, hearing it creaking and knowing that the effort will have to come to an end, my effort, the tree's effort, man's interjection is missing here, heh, the shriek of the bark coming loose, crunch (...)-*

*«Raised from the Ground», 1980*



In some sections – for example, on the champagne stopper and cork paper production lines – manual (almost artisan) production coexisted with semi-automated processes.



In the Mundet factories in Seixal and Amora, females accounted for 56% of all workers in the 1940s.



The high number of child workers reflects in the factory's disciplinary sanctions that primarily fall into the categories of playing during work time and lack of attention to the task.



## [WORKER MOVEMENTS AND PROTESTS ]

*There are two words, not to accept a wage of twenty-five escudos, not to work for less than thirty-three escudos a day, from sunrise to sunset, because this is still the way it has to be, the fruits do not all ripen at the same time (...) It is true that news is coming from everywhere that men, many of them, are refusing to work for such a miserable wage, but what is a man to do if he has a wife and children (...)*

«Raised from the Ground», 1980

Throughout the 20th century, rising worker dissatisfaction at the poor salaries, long hours of work and precarious working conditions, growing recourse to female and child labour, reductions in the number of days of weekly work and the constant increases in the cost of living led to various worker protests and strikes in the council of Seixal, which frequently triggered repression and surveillance from the military and police authorities.

At the beginning of the 1940, the cork workers were the single largest socio-professional group – the Mundet factory in Seixal along employed 2,269 cork workers in 1947 – and the best organised in the municipality.

In the following decades, faced with the threat of dismissal, worker resistance became characterised by, among other actions, petitions, demonstrations by workers outside the headquarters of the National Cork Workers Union of Setúbal District, in Seixal and the company management offices.

*The foreman is watching, you have to prove to your comrades that you are as much a man as them, and besides, you can't be without work next week, you have your children, and then two of them raise their sticks, they are not your children but it is as if they were (...), you lower yourself (...), when you feel the load, your knees give out, but you snap your teeth, you straighten your kidneys and little by little you work yourself upright, it is a huge trunk, a gigantic bough, you even think you've got a hundred-year-old cork-oak on your shoulders, and you take the first step, the pile of firewood is so far away, the comrades staring, the foreman (...)*

«Raised from the Ground», 1980



Demonstration by cork workers on the eve of the republican revolution, in 1910.



The Association of the Cork Workers Class of Seixal (established in 1921) saw its headquarters on Rua Dr. Miguel Bombarda, shut down by the police in 1934. Five years later, the regime managed to impose the National Union of Cork Workers of Setúbal District, with its headquarters in Seixal.

## [THE TRANSMISSION OF KNOW-HOW IN FACTORIES]

*It should be stated that these years of João Mau-Tempo will be those of his professional education, in the traditional and rural sense that a working man has to know everything, as good at reaping the crop as at harvesting cork (...). This knowledge is transmitted down through the generations without examination or discussion, it is so because it has always been so (...). Between the ages of ten and twenty we have to learn everything and quickly, or there will be no boss accepting us.*

«Raised from the Ground», 1980

Throughout the first decades of factory operation, the shortcomings in technical knowledge and the technologies available to Mundet workers through means of formal learning – given the almost complete lack of technical schools for workers – were overcome by support from Catalan masters, through the conveying of wisdom acquired through close observation of the actions of those who taught and had experience in the workplace, which resulted in the training of qualified cork workers. This worker training was then strengthened by traditional practices in the field and the generational circulation of technical knowledge, with parents – day-labourers or workers with specialist skills for cork working (among others, strip sorters, trieurs, choppers and squarers) – seeking to start their children young in factory life in order to convey to them, in the working context, their knowledge and professional techniques, thereby enabling the inclusion and advance of their children within the working structure of the company.

*Manuel Espada perched on the top of this cork oak, barefoot, he is the serious and barefoot bird, jumping from branch to branch, and he does not sing, he does not feel like singing, the axe is the boss in this job, chop, chop, the line that goes around the boughs or is drawn vertically in the trunk, and then the axe handle acting as a lever, strength, and finally, it is true after all, here is the hoarse bird that lives inside the cork oak, it is a scream, but nobody feels sorry for it. The straws rain down from above, falling on the strips of cork newly torn from the trunks (...).*

«Raised from the Ground», 1980



In the factory's daily routines, workers learned on the job how to identify the different characteristics of the raw material they were working with, the technical jargon of the instruments and machinery that they applied as well as knowledge about the manufacturing processes and procedures.

## [RAISED FROM THE GROUND]

*In this place of landed-estates, so far from Carmo in Lisbon, not a shot was heard here nor were people shouting in the fields, it was not easy to understand what a revolution is and how it is made (...).*

*And then somewhere on the landed-estate, history will remember to tell us which one, the workers occupied a piece of land. To have work, nothing else (...). And then on another estate the workers came in and said, «We've come to work». And what happened here happened there (...).*

«Raised from the Ground», 1980

In the 1960s, the company, faced with the development of competitors to cork (especially plastic stoppers) coupled with serious management problems, decided on the closure of the factories in Amora, Mora and Ponte de Sor.

In the following decade, production only continued at the factories in Seixal and Montijo (amounting to a total of around 1,250 workers), even while undertaking a gradual reduction in worker numbers.

As with the rural workers in the Alentejo who, raised from the ground, took over the agricultural estates, in the Mundet factory in Seixal, the 25 April 1974 revolution gave way to an emotional and turbulent process of political awareness and the emancipation of workers who, organised into worker commissions, struggled to maintain their posts of employment and restore the viability of the company.

Following various difficulties and setbacks, the factory gates definitively closed in 1988 on a site where social struggles had coexisted with cork industrial activities throughout the 20th century.

*Some come on foot, those from nearer and others from far away, if they couldn't find better transport, there are those who ride old bicycles that wobble and creak like mule carts, those who could take the bus, and so they are approaching, coming from all directions of the compass, it is a great wind that blows them. (...) they are not many, but they have arrived, and they bring a woman, Gracinda Mau-Tempo also wanted to come, there is no one left to hold the women back, that is what the elder and eldest think, but they say nothing (...).*

«Raised from the Ground», 1980



On 31 May 1974, the Mundet workers, organised into commissions, began to intervene in company management.



Progressively, workers embarked on a process of political awareness building and the campaign for the right to decent employment and keeping the company viable.



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