

BELGRAVIA GALLERY

Jurgen Schadeberg's Best Shot

Leo Benedictus

The Guardian

16 June 2007

"I don't think he was aware of what a huge battle he was about to begin".

The first time I photographed Nelson Mandela was in December 1951, at an ANC Conference in Bloemfontein. Then, about six weeks later, for Life magazine, I went to his office in Johannesburg. At that time, Mandela was still very much in the background. He was the youth leader of the ANC, although he didn't appear on platforms to my knowledge. It was the period when Walter Sisulu was more in the public eye, and Mandela was still in the early stages of getting seriously involved.

He was an extremely calm and controlled person, or gave the impression of it. We had about 15 minutes with him, and at the end I vaguely remember that he just got up and said, " I have to be off to court now." He put his books under his arm, and that's when I got this particular picture.

I think it showed his personality, which I learned to know over the years, this very



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relaxed, but also quite thoughtful person. And you can see exactly what he is at that moment, a lawyer sharing a practice with Oliver Tambo. You can see "Mandela and Tambo Attorneys" reversed on the window. I had no sense that I was taking a picture of some who would become a global figure.

A month or so later I began to meet him quite often. Late at night, we went to a printing shop which printed ANC pamphlets and had some curried chicken and brandy, which was illegal because black people at that time were not allowed to drink alcohol.

I don't think he was aware back then of what a huge battle he was about to begin. I look at this picture differently now, but as one matures one looks at everything differently. Maybe it has more meaning now that it did at that time.

Curriculum Vitae

Born: Berlin 1931

Studied: "About a year of mentoring from someone who was a friend of the family in Berlin. Then I went to Hamburg as an apprentice with the German Press Agency."

Inspiration: "I do admire Henri Cartier-Bresson's work, obviously", Berlin 1931.

High Point: "Doing an interesting job."

Low Point: "When I had to leave South Africa in 1964 because it became more difficult. I had to come to Europe and start all over again."

Pet Hate: "People who find it difficult to paint, then discover a camera and go, "Wow, I'm an artist!"

Dream Subject: "I'd just like to carry on, that's all. I enjoy it."

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